

WHISPERS BENEATH THE PEAKS

A COLLECTION OF SHORT STORIES



TARIE NAAZ

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*Dedicated to
My Brother Inam*



Acknowledgement

Writing 'Whispers Beneath the Peaks' has been an extraordinary journey—one that would not have been possible without the unwavering support and love of those closest to me.

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Contents

1. The Holy Bribe.....	7
2. Two Brothers.....	12
3. In the Chinara Grove.....	18
4. Preeti	23
5. It is Never Too Late.....	32
6. Unbreakable Friendship	40
7. Thief at Molvi's Home	48
8. An Atheist.....	54
9. A Morning of Terror.....	59
10. BBC: A Storyteller	67
11. An Old Man.....	72
12. Eleven Daughters	81
13. Grandpa.....	86
14. The Choice Between Heart and Mind	94
15. Soulmates	102
16. On a Quest for Truth.....	111
17. A Champion of Social Justice	116
18. Fatimah's Fateful Journey.....	122
19. Murder of a Merchant	130
20. Toy Shop	138
21. The Misadventures of a Naughty Boy.....	144
22. A Tale of a Tailor.....	150
23. Electricity Bill	156
24. Fruit Vendor.....	164

The Holy Bribe



Throughout my life, I had always harboured a quiet scepticism towards individuals who displayed overt religious devotion. I cannot pinpoint a single moment or experience that birthed this outlook, but I suspect it originated from the environment in which I was raised. I grew up in a relatively liberal household, where subtlety and modesty were valued, and overt expressions of piety were viewed with suspicion. The quieter, more unassuming individuals were often seen as being more genuine and trustworthy. There was a prevailing belief that those who wore their religious devotion on their sleeves—who made their faith a visible part of their daily persona—were often compensating for something, using religiosity as a veneer to mask their true character or to gain social favour. Whether consciously or unconsciously, I internalized this bias, associating demonstrative faith with potential duplicity.

This deeply ingrained view, however, was solidified when I was transferred to a small village called Narbal. My assignment in Narbal introduced me to a man named Abdul Ahad, the Assistant Treasury Officer (ATO) in the village's treasury office. Little did I know that this encounter would become a profound lesson in the intricacies of human nature.

The treasury office itself was tucked away near a gently flowing rivulet that snaked through the village. It was a setting that evoked a sense of peaceful isolation. Clusters of drooping willow trees lined the edges of the water, their delicate branches dancing in the breeze. A lone pear tree stood in a corner of the office

premises, its fruit not yet ripened, adding to the quiet, somewhat melancholic beauty of the place. In contrast to the picturesque surroundings, the building itself was dilapidated, a worn-down structure that had clearly seen better days. The office was made up of three rooms, each with its own designated function. One room housed the clerical staff, where stacks of paperwork littered the desks, and the monotonous hum of bureaucratic conversations filled the air. The second room was Abdul Ahad's office—his domain, where he handled the village's financial matters with quiet authority. The third room, located at the back of the office, was mostly forgotten. Once serving as a storage area, it had been transformed into a makeshift prayer room.

In the dim, secluded confines of the back room, Abdul Ahad would retreat twice daily to pray *Namaz*. His commitment to performing his prayers on time was unwavering. Every few hours, as the faint calls to prayer drifted through the air from the village mosque, Abdul Ahad would rise from his desk, leave his official duties behind, and disappear into that quiet room. There, he would kneel on his prayer mat, fully immersed in his devotion, seemingly detached from the world around him. Despite my predispositions, I could not help but notice the sincerity of his religious practice. There was something profoundly quiet yet intense about his connection to his faith.

As part of my job as a finance officer, I was required to present departmental bills to Abdul Ahad for approval and payment. The process was fairly routine, though not without its challenges. One aspect that had become almost customary in my dealings with the clerical staff was the practice of paying a commission for the clearance of bills. It was an unspoken rule that everyone followed, including myself. The clerks expected a cut from every bill they processed, and without argument or fuss, I paid it, as did all the other officers from various departments. This system of bribery, while frustrating, had become a normalized aspect of navigating bureaucratic hurdles.

Initially, I had no idea that Abdul Ahad, the man whose daily prayers I had observed with mild intrigue, was also complicit in this under-the-table operation. I assumed that the clerks managed these side deals on their own, with little involvement from the higher-ups. However, my assumptions were soon shattered one day when the head clerk was absent, and I had to present my bill directly to Abdul Ahad. Without the usual intermediary, Abdul Ahad handled the paperwork himself. After signing the bill, he handed it back to me but paused before I could leave. "Before you take the bill," he said, "please meet with the peon in the main office."

I was puzzled and asked him, "Why do I need to meet the peon?"

He responded cryptically, "Just meet him. He will explain everything."

I followed his instruction and found the peon, who led me into the prayer room at the back of the office—the same room where Abdul Ahad offered his daily prayers. The peon then told me to place Rs 7,000 under the prayer rug. It was at that moment that I realized Abdul Ahad, too, had a significant share in the commissions being collected from the passing of bills. Despite his outward display of piety and devotion, he was deeply involved in the same corrupt practices that I had long assumed were limited to the lower ranks of the clerical staff.

Surprisingly, I wasn't particularly shocked by this revelation. Perhaps my earlier biases about overtly religious individuals had prepared me for this kind of discovery. In a way, it only reinforced the belief I had carried for so long—that those who are too quick to showcase their religiosity are often the ones hiding something unsavoury beneath the surface. Abdul Ahad's actions seemed to confirm my long-held suspicions, yet they also left me with a lingering sense of disillusionment. It wasn't just

about the money or the corruption; it was about the stark contrast between his outward devotion and his inner moral contradictions.

The corruption continued without pause, and whether I was complicit willingly or unwittingly, it was clear that this practice was deeply entrenched. Yet, one question gnawed at me incessantly: how could a man who so outwardly practiced his faith, who never missed a single prayer, be involved in such dishonesty? Weeks and months slipped by; spring turned to autumn, and autumn gave way to the chill of winter. It was on one of those bitterly cold winter days when I found myself once again in the treasury office, seated across from Abdul Ahad. He was alone, save for his peon.

As I sat there, he offered me a cup of Kashmiri tea, which I accepted gratefully. Our conversation began with the usual small talk about the inadequate heating in government offices during winter, but gradually, it shifted to more substantive topics. We meandered into discussions about Kashmiri politics, and as the conversation deepened, I felt an urge to ask the question that had been plaguing me for so long.

"Sir," I began, tentatively. "Can I ask you a question if you don't mind?"

He looked up from his tea, seemingly intrigued. "Oh yes, why not?" he replied with a welcoming tone.

Taking a deep breath, I continued, "I beg your pardon in advance, but I've been wanting to ask this for a while. You're a very religious man. You never miss a prayer, you keep a beard, and you follow your faith so meticulously. And yet, you're involved in taking commissions. Doesn't that seem contradictory?"

For a moment, he seemed taken aback by my bluntness. He remained silent, thinking for what felt like an eternity before finally responding, "These are two different things. Following

religion is compulsory, yes, but we also have to live in this world. We cannot abandon the worldly life, and when we live in this world, we must follow its rules as well. Life is a blessing, and to enjoy this blessing, we need to understand that the world operates on certain principles. Prayer is for the hereafter, but money, well... that's for this life. Both are necessary."

I listened to his words carefully, his logic unsettling yet clear in his own mind. After a few more moments of conversation, I shook his hand, thanked him for the tea, and left his office. Outside, the cold hit me hard, and I zipped my jacket all the way up to my neck as I walked toward the bus stop. His words echoed in my mind as I boarded the bus home. How could someone so deeply invested in faith justify such moral contradictions? How could faith and corruption live side by side within the same person?

As the bus rumbled down the road, the familiar sights of the small village of Narbal came into view. It was a quiet, unassuming place, and yet, it was here that I was reminded of the complexity of human beings. Abdul Ahad's duality left me reflecting on my own beliefs. Human beings, I realized, are not so easily categorized into neat boxes of good and bad, right and wrong. Faith, morality, and character don't always align in the ways we expect. Abdul Ahad was a man who prayed with an almost otherworldly devotion, yet he was also a man who participated in corruption without hesitation.

This paradox forced me to confront the unsettling truth that people are rarely as straightforward as they seem. We often carry conflicting identities within ourselves, and the lines between righteousness and wrongdoing are not always clear. As I arrived home, I couldn't shake the thought that perhaps this is what it means to be human—to live in the tension between our highest ideals and our basest instincts.



Two Brothers



In the heart of Srinagar was a quaint neighbourhood known as Tankipora, nestled amid the serene banks of two meandering rivers. There lay a community that painted a vivid tapestry of life. On one side, the grand Jhelum River, the lifeline of Kashmir, flowed majestically, while on the other, a charming rivulet named *Kutte Kol* whispered its secrets to the earth. This neighbourhood was a mosaic of humble abodes, inhabited predominantly by lower-middle-class families, each etching their own story into the annals of time.

Yet, amidst this modest milieu, an intriguing narrative unfolded along the banks of these two rivers. *Kutte Kol* served as a vital conduit for the transportation of essential goods, connecting distant places, and facilitating the trade of indispensable commodities.

Within the confines of this unassuming neighborhood, a modest house stood on the roadside, leading to Habba Kadal. The house belonged to a man named Abdul Majid, a very humble but carefree man, married to a very wise lady called Raja Begum. They were blessed with three sons, each destined to carve their own unique path in the world.

The eldest of the trio bore the name Latif, a young man whose heart danced to the rhythm of words and stories. He possessed an insatiable appetite for the works of Shakespeare, his passion for the Bard's creations akin to a blazing fire. When Latif welcomed his firstborn into the world, he was reading Julius

Caesar during those days, and he chose to name his elder son Caesar, a homage to the iconic characters that had captured his imagination. In a parallel gesture, his younger son was christened William, a tribute to the literary genius, William Shakespeare.

Caesar and William were born just eleven months apart, their early upbringing was unique. Their parents decided to raise Caesar at his maternal home, where he received boundless affection from his maternal grandparents, who cherished him dearly. In contrast, William was brought up in Tankipora, where he formed a special bond with his paternal grandparents, especially his grandfather, Abdul Majid.

During their childhood, the interaction between Caesar and William was limited. They would meet sporadically when Caesar visited Tankipora for a few days, or when William accompanied his parents to his maternal home. Despite their physical separation and distinct upbringings, a strong affection existed between them.

However, their personalities differed significantly. While they had love for each other, their nature was contrasting, adding an interesting dimension to their relationship. William revelled in mischief, often found indulging in playful escapades by the riverbanks. He was a good swimmer as well and would love to swim in the *Kutte Kol*. In contrast, Caesar exuded a tranquil and docile nature. During his visits to Tankipora, he couldn't resist sneaking into his elder uncle's room, drawn to the azure-hued books perched high on the shelves. He harboured a belief that these books held something extraordinary within their pages, a yearning to explore their contents growing stronger with each visit.

When Caesar and William reached the age at which they could be admitted to school, Caesar returned to Tankipora to live with his parents. They were enrolled in the Islamia school at Shaheed Gunj. They found themselves not only in the same school

but also in the same class, sharing the same desk. Here started their journey of actual friendship. Besides brothers, they became best friends of each other.

Their lives became intricately intertwined as they navigated the daily routines of school and childhood. They would sleep together, wake up together, attend school together, complete homework together, and play together.

William was very naughty, and he often roped Caesar into his antics to ensure that in the event of getting caught, they would share the responsibility rather than placing it solely on William's shoulders. However, beneath his naughty exterior, William had a certain innocence, a paradoxical facet of his character.

Their shared hobby was collecting Bollywood film star cards, amassing more than a hundred of them. To protect their collection from their strict father's disapproval, they hid the cards beneath a charcoal drum in their store. One day, their father stumbled upon the cards and called both sons for an explanation. William, with teary eyes, immediately confessed, leaving his father with the impression that he was the sole collector. However, Caesar remained calm throughout this encounter, revealing no hint of his awareness of the situation.

Over time, their bond grew so strong that they became inseparable. Their friends and interests became intertwined, making everything they did a shared experience. Their love for each other was so profound that anyone daring to provoke a quarrel between them would quickly find themselves facing both of them, ready to defend each other.

On one crisp morning, as the sun began to cast its golden glow on the quiet town, William, a naughty child with a twinkle in his eye, found himself struck by a rebellious idea while on his way to school. The routine of classes, homework, and lectures seemed monotonous, and a spark of adventure ignited within him. "Why not bunk school today?" he pondered.

Unable to contain his excitement, William eagerly shared his newfound plan with his elder brother, Caesar. The two brothers, bound by a shared sense of mischief and a tight sibling bond, exchanged mischievous grins. Caesar's eyes mirrored William's enthusiasm, and without hesitation, they jointly decided to skip school for the day, venturing into the unknown. The streets of the town became their canvas, and the brothers, armed with a spirit of rebellion, set out to explore the hidden streets.

The city unfolded before them, a tapestry of sights, sounds, and experiences waiting to be discovered. They wandered through crowded marketplaces, exploring vibrant stalls and immersing themselves in the lively atmosphere. Their journey led them to a captivating exhibition, where they indulged in the sheer delight of intricate handicrafts, pausing to appreciate each unique piece. Amidst the array of artistic wonders, they found themselves captivated by the skill and creativity on display. Each step fuelled their excitement, turning their impromptu decision into a day of unexpected joy.

The brothers found themselves in quirky bookstores, housing a diverse collection of English and Urdu books. Caesar, a book enthusiast, chose Diwan Ghalib and recited a few verses. William observed with interest. They exited the shop, continuing their wandering from one shop to another shop. Laughter echoed through alleyways as they shared anecdotes and revelled in the freedom of the day. Time seemed to stretch endlessly as they embraced the spontaneity of their adventure.

However, the delightful escapade eventually stirred the pangs of hunger within them. Acknowledging the need for sustenance, they decided to pause their explorations and seek a quiet refuge. Finding solace in a shaded corner of the exhibition ground, they unpacked their carefully prepared tiffin, a culinary ensemble from home that promised both familiarity and comfort. Amid the vibrant day, they indulged in a leisurely lunch, savouring

not just the flavours of the food but also the camaraderie that heightened the essence of their unforgettable day.

Taking a break after lunch, Caesar reclined on the vibrant green grass, the soft blades providing a comfortable retreat. As they rested, a leisurely conversation blossomed, weaving through the day's exploits as they meandered through eclectic shops, each venue an individual chapter in their shared narrative.

Their journey led them beyond the confines of the exhibition, where they embarked on a leisurely stroll through the bustling market. Amidst the lively atmosphere, their attention was captured by a street magician, who skilfully wove tales to captivate the gathered crowd. This captivating storyteller magician was also presented with mystical amulets promising protection against malevolent forces and the bestowal of good fortune.

Amid this captivating spectacle, an enchanting fusion of narratives and mystique filled the air, creating a palpable sense of wonder among the curious onlookers. Caesar and William, drawn into the spellbinding performance, listened intently, their fascination growing with each passing moment. The allure of the amulets, with their promises of safeguarding and prosperity, further heightened the magical ambiance.

Despite their desire to acquire one of these captivating talismans, financial constraints held them back. They lingered until the magician concluded his sales pitch, witnessing the dispersal of the intrigued crowd. Subsequently, they strolled away, exploring various shops along the way.

As the sun began its descent, casting long shadows that painted the city in hues of amber and indigo, a sense of responsibility tugged at their conscience. With a mixture of reluctance and satisfaction, they decided to make their way back home.

Before crossing the threshold into the familiar sanctuary of their dwelling, a clandestine desire for discretion prompted them to pause at a humble tap adjacent to a local grocery shop. With a deliberate and cautious demeanour, they cleansed their faces, a symbolic gesture aimed at evading any potential suspicion that might arise from their clandestine escapade.

The next morning, as they set off for school, an unspoken understanding passed between them. William and Caesar, bound by a shared secret, exchanged knowing glances within the school's bustling corridors. Their grins, fleeting yet electric, hinted at the thrill of the day before—a memory etched into the very fabric of their brotherhood.

The ordinary town had transformed into a realm of possibilities, and the brothers, fuelled by the thrill of their daring escapade, faced the routine of school with newfound appreciation and a treasure trove of memories that would last a lifetime.



In the Chinar Grove



In the gloomy month of November, when the sun hid behind a blanket of black clouds, I found myself walking through a chinar grove. The once vibrant green leaves, now lifeless and scattered, crunched beneath my every step. The rhythmic cadence of leaves crumbling beneath my feet seemed to echo the sombre mood of the grove, offering me an unexpected solace in the act.

Amidst the silent beauty of the grove, only two benches stood, their surfaces covered in a colourful blanket of chinar leaves and other autumn foliage. Fascinated by the sight, I gently brushed aside the fallen foliage from one of the benches and settled myself comfortably upon it. As if driven by an unfathomable force, my hand reached into my pocket, retrieving a battered box of matches and a pack of cigarettes. One of them found its place between my lips.

A cigarette, already perched between my lips, waited patiently for its ignition. With a flick of the matchstick, a warm flame emerged from the humble matchbox, casting a fleeting glow upon my face. The flame danced briefly before meeting the waiting cigarette, and a solitary puff filled the air with a cloud of smoky release.

Just as my first exhale danced in the autumn breeze, a sudden gust of wind began to stir, breathing life into the grove. The leaves upon the ground, once motionless and forlorn, began to flicker and sway in harmony with the gentle rustling sound that enveloped the surroundings. It was as if the embrace of the breeze

had awakened the slumbering spirit of the grove, breathing new life into its once sombre appearance.

The clouds that had cloaked the sun soon parted, allowing brilliant rays of light to pierce through the darkness. The chinar grove, previously shrouded in shadows, now basked in the golden glow of sunlight. The ashen sky transformed into a vibrant canvas of pinks and oranges, casting a warm hue upon every leaf and every tree.

In that transformative moment, observing the rejuvenation of nature, I felt a lightness in my heart that mirrored the scene before me. The weight of my own gloom and worries seemed to dissolve, replaced by a sense of peace and tranquility.

I used to visit the grove during my childhood along with my friends, and together we would partake in exhilarating games of hide and seek. Sunlight filtered through the lush green leaves of the towering chinar trees, casting playful shadows upon the soft earth below. We would squeal with laughter as we scurried from one hiding spot to another, seeking the perfect hiding place.

Back then, the grove was untamed, with no fences to contain its natural charm or benches to mark it as a park. The absence of man-made structures only added to its allure, allowing us to roam freely and lose ourselves in its wild beauty. The chinar trees were abundant, standing tall and proud, their gnarled branches telling stories of time gone by. Sadly, over the years, some of these majestic trees have been cut down, leaving gaps in the landscape that once felt so complete.

Autumn, however, brought a special kind of magic. As the chinar leaves turned fiery shades of orange, red, and gold, they carpeted the ground in a vibrant mosaic. My friends and I would gather these dry leaves into massive piles and set them alight, watching as the flames crackled and danced. The air would fill with the distinct, earthy aroma of burning leaves, a scent that still lingers in my memory. We would jump and dance around the

fires, our faces glowing with excitement and the warmth of the flames. The grove transformed into a festival of our own making, where the simplest of activities felt extraordinary.

Those carefree days in the grove were a precious chapter of my childhood, filled with laughter, innocence, and an unbreakable bond with nature. Even now, the memory of that enchanted place stirs a longing within me—a desire to relive those moments when life was as simple and pure as the rustling leaves of the chinar trees.

The grove holds a special place in my heart, for it felt like a sanctuary of laughter and friendship. Time seemed to stand still within those ancient, gnarled trunks, and each visit was an escape from the buzzing outside world. But as I grew older and life took its natural course, my friends scattered to different paths, leaving behind fading memories of innocent joy.

Nostalgic tears well up in my eyes as I find myself beneath the very chinar tree that used to be my favourite hiding spot. Its twisted bark stands as a testament to the passage of time, just as my aging skin does. I touch the cool roughness of the tree, finding solace and a connection to the younger version of myself that once revelled in this very grove.

I often visit this grove and when I bid farewell to the grove and make my way back to my empty home, I carry with me a renewed sense of purpose – to fill my days with joy, to seek out new moments of connection, and to cherish the memories that have shaped me. For within the grove, I discover that even in solitude, there exists a reservoir of strength and a reminder of the beautiful tapestry of life that has woven its way through my soul.

Anyway, the wind died down, and the quivering leaves settled into a serene stillness. I took one last puff of my cigarette before extinguishing it on the bench where I sat. Planning to head back home, I began to rise when a captivating sight caught my attention. An old lady, adorned in an opulent shawl, entered the

grove with the support of a robust young boy, who appeared to be around 20 years old. Intrigued, I remained seated as they approached.

With careful tenderness, the young boy helped the old lady to settle comfortably on the bench across from mine. A closer look revealed the hollowed cheeks and delicate wrinkles encircling her eyes. There was something achingly familiar about her, although her name escaped me. Unable to resist the pull of curiosity, I continued observing her intently.

As I searched my mind for any signs of recognition, I found myself delving into the depths of my past. In vain, I desperately sought to unravel the enigma of her identity. Disappointed by my fruitless efforts, I reluctantly conceded defeat and abandoned the idea of reminiscing her name. Preparing to leave, I decided to give up on the elusive memories that had eluded me.

However, just as I was about to depart, melodic laughter filled the air, resonating in my ears like a sweet symphony. In that instant, I recognized her distinctive laughter, and all doubt dissipated. It was Tabassum, one of my former classmates. The memories of our shared school days came flooding back, wrapping me in a warm wave of nostalgia.

Tabassum was a stunning young girl with a vibrant complexion and rosy cheeks. I couldn't help but be captivated by her beauty, as she was perhaps the most mesmerizing girl I had ever laid eyes on. Her eyes exuded a sense of contentment and joy, and her smile was enchanting, setting her apart from anyone else. The sound of her distinctive laughter was so invigorating, I felt it had the power to bring life back to the deceased. It became a delightful game between us - I would gaze at her, and she would humorously wink back at me. This interaction became familiar to her, and she even encouraged me to continue.

One day, I summoned up the courage to approach her. I eagerly waited for her at a street corner, my heart pounding in anticipation. However, when she walked by, my nerves got the best of me. The fear of angering her immobilized me, and I found myself unable to utter a single word.

Her appearance had changed significantly since our last encounter. The passage of time had etched its marks upon her, leaving behind a visage that revealed the wisdom of a life well-lived. Despite the physical transformations, her laughter remained unchanged, a timeless essence that had once filled our classrooms with joy and mischief.

Unable to suppress my curiosity any longer, I returned to the bench and greeted her, in a casual manner, I inquired, "Are you not the Tabassum, who used to be my classmate?" The response that ensued was a sharp retort laden with anger: "My name is Baha, not Tabassum!" The disbelief echoed in my mind as her eyes locked with the boy accompanying her and then returned to me with a palpable sense of distrust. Overwhelmed by the weight of her piercing gaze, I dared not meet her eyes again, hastily diverting my attention as I made a quick exit. The echoes of her laughter, tinged with irony and poignancy, reverberated in my ears long after I departed the chinar grove.



Preeti



Sarfaraz, once a man of boundless energy and vigour, now found himself tethered to the quiet solitude of his grand, aging home. The walls, once alive with the laughter and footsteps of family, had fallen into a serene silence, save for the occasional creak or murmur of the wind. His once-vibrant world had slowly shrunk over the years, contracting to the four corners of his bedroom. The bed had become his haven. Beside his bed stood a wooden table, worn from years of use. It held the few items he still relied on daily: a lamp for his late-night reading, a pair of glasses, and his most cherished possession, his coffee maker. It was a small, unassuming device, but it symbolized the little joys he clung to. Each morning, with a steady hand, he brewed his own coffee. The aroma of freshly brewed coffee filled the air, warming not just the room, but his spirit as well.

Despite the limitations of old age, Sarfaraz had managed to preserve a small sense of independence. Once a day, with measured determination, he would rise from his bed and shuffle into the kitchen to prepare a meal.

Sarfaraz had found a convenient way to take care of his daily needs. He would simply call 7C, a local departmental store, and place his order over the phone. The store had become a trusted partner, and every few days, they would arrive at Sarfaraz's doorstep with bags filled with groceries and household items. This simple arrangement allowed him to avoid the difficulty of leaving the comfort of his home. The seamless delivery service had

become a vital lifeline for Sarfaraz, ensuring his essential requirements were met without hassle.

Yet, despite these small comforts, Sarfaraz's heart remained heavy with longing. His world had grown so small that the walls of his home felt like the borders of his universe. The garden outside, once his pride and joy, had fallen into neglect, the flowers no longer blooming as brightly as they once had. His days were marked by routine.

In his twilight years, Sarfaraz had come to understand that life was as much about letting go as it was about holding on. He had let go of many things—his youth, his strength, the bustling family life he once cherished.

One chilly autumn afternoon, as the golden sunlight filtered through the curtains of his modest room, Sarfaraz found himself rummaging through his wardrobe, his mind preoccupied with finding a particular shawl that had mysteriously disappeared. His hands grazed over piles of old clothes, folded and forgotten when something else caught his attention—an old, dusty photo album, tucked away in a corner. A nostalgic smile crept across his face as he gently pulled it out and placed it on the wooden table beside his bed.

With the shawl search temporarily abandoned, Sarfaraz's curiosity got the better of him. He sat down on the edge of his bed, the album now resting on his lap. Slowly, he began flipping through the thick pages, each turn revealing pieces of his past—birthday celebrations, family gatherings, and moments that felt like they belonged to another lifetime. The photos, arranged with care, seemed to speak to him, each capturing a fleeting moment in time.

As he moved deeper into the album, a particular photograph stopped him in his tracks. It was a picture of him and a girl named Preeti, smiling widely at the camera, with the backdrop of vibrant colours of a cultural event on a sunlit beach. The

photograph had been taken during a college trip to Mangalore, a memory that had been buried under the weight of years. Seeing it now, he was instantly transported back to those carefree days, when life had been about exploration, laughter, and a deep sense of adventure.

Sarfaraz was in his first year of the BSc program when the college administration announced an all-India cultural tour, an opportunity for students to explore different regions of the country and participate in a cultural festival. The idea of traveling across India, experiencing new places, and meeting new people thrilled him. Without hesitation, he filled out the application form and eagerly awaited the selection results. His joy knew no bounds when he secured a spot among the chosen participants.

The day of departure arrived, and the atmosphere was electric with excitement. The students gathered in the college's convocation hall, their chatter filling the room as they exchanged stories of anticipation. From there, they made their way to the KMD bus stand, where a large bus awaited them for the first leg of their journey from Srinagar to Jammu. The journey began in high spirits, with students singing lively songs and laughing at jokes, the energy in the air contagious.

At Ramban, the bus halted for a break, and the group eagerly hopped off to enjoy a hearty lunch at a local *dhaba*. The warm, spicy food provided a welcome respite from the cool mountain air, and Sarfaraz vividly remembered the camaraderie that grew over shared meals. After their lunch, they resumed their journey, reaching Jammu by evening, where they spent the night at the railway station, filled with excitement for what lay ahead.

The next morning, they boarded the Rajdhani Express, bound for Delhi. After a brief stop in Delhi, they boarded another train that would take them all the way to Mangalore, via Bombay. The journey stretched over two and a half days, but time flew by in the company of newfound friends. Sarfaraz recalled how they

would gather by the train windows, watching the countryside roll by, their conversations weaving between the beauty of the land and the excitement of the cultural event awaiting them.

Upon finally reaching Mangalore, the group was greeted with a warm breeze and the scent of the sea. The group was accommodated in a local higher secondary school, its tall, old walls now housing hundreds of students from across Karnataka and beyond. The energy of the event was palpable, with students displaying their talents in music, dance, and art, representing the diverse cultural heritage of India.

The school was alive with energy, a whirlwind of colours, sounds, and emotions. Everywhere Sarfaraz turned, he saw students showcasing their skills, from intricate classical dances to soulful music performances. The diverse talents on display mirrored the many cultures of India, and the atmosphere was nothing short of electric.

It was during one of the music performances in the evening that Sarfaraz's attention was drawn to the stage. A girl stood there, her fingers strumming a guitar, her voice carrying over the crowd like a gentle breeze. She wore a simple but elegant pink suit, and something about her presence made her stand out in the sea of performers. She looked poised and radiant, completely immersed in her performance, and Sarfaraz was captivated, not just by her music but by her beauty. From that evening, she became a constant thought in his mind. He couldn't stop himself from wondering when and how he could talk to her.

For the next few days, Sarfaraz tried to find subtle ways to interact with her. He would spot her in the mornings, walking towards the bathroom to freshen up, and he would offer her a quick greeting. His heart would race with every "Good morning," and though she responded kindly, Sarfaraz longed for a real conversation.

One evening, as everyone was queuing up to collect dinner from the food counter, fate finally played into his hands. Sarfaraz noticed her standing a few places ahead of him, struggling slightly with her tray as she balanced her plate and drink. Taking a deep breath, he quickly stepped forward and helped her with her dinner. She smiled at him, and for the first time, they exchanged more than just a passing glance. It was a small moment, but for Sarfaraz, it was significant—their first real interaction.

In the days that followed, their interactions remained brief but frequent. Sarfaraz found himself looking for her, whether it was during breakfast or in the crowded hallways. And then, one evening, as he was walking down a quiet corridor, he saw her again—alone this time, her pace was slow as if she was lost in thought. Sarfaraz knew this was the moment he'd been waiting for. Gathering every ounce of courage, he approached her, his heart pounding in his chest.

"I want to tell you something," he blurted out before he could stop himself.

She turned to him, startled but curious. "What is it?" she asked.

"I... I want to confess that I like you," Sarfaraz said, his voice trembling slightly. "Would you like to be my friend?"

For a moment, there was silence between them, and Sarfaraz held his breath. She looked at him, her eyes wide with surprise. Then, after what felt like an eternity, she smiled—a soft, uncertain smile that hinted at her own confusion.

"Let me think over it," she said gently, and with that, she walked away, leaving Sarfaraz standing in the hallway, a mixture of hope and uncertainty swirling inside him.

But her smile had been enough. From that point on, Sarfaraz and Preeti grew closer, their bond deepening with each

passing day. They spent the rest of the festival exploring Mangalore together—visiting its pristine beaches, wandering through its historical sites, and attending the vibrant performances that filled the evenings with joy. They shared laughs, conversations, and countless small moments that brought them closer together.

One such moment had been captured in a photograph, now tucked away in Sarfaraz's album—a picture of the two of them standing on the beach, the sun setting behind them, casting a golden glow over the ocean. They had been laughing, their faces lit with the carefree joy that comes from shared experiences and blossoming friendships.

The days had flown by, and the camp, with its vibrant energy and moments of serendipity, was drawing to a close. The students, who had gathered from all corners of Karnataka, were now leaving in groups, their laughter replaced by the quietness of farewell. In a time before the omnipresence of mobile phones, the only means to sustain friendships, or in Sarfaraz and Preeti's case, something far deeper was through the tender art of letter-writing. As the buses lined up to carry the students back to their homes, Sarfaraz and Preeti exchanged their postal addresses, knowing that physical separation would soon pull them apart but determined to keep their connection alive through the written word.

The morning of Preeti's departure was overcast with the heavy burden of impending separation. She stood before Sarfaraz, her eyes shimmering with unshed tears, a silent testament to the emotions that words alone could not convey. Sarfaraz, sensing her heartache, gently reached for her hand. Drawing her close, he whispered into her ear, his voice laced with quiet urgency, "I will never forget you. You are my love." His words lingered in the air like a solemn vow, and in that tender moment, he pressed a soft kiss to her neck, a gesture so intimate and sincere that it conveyed what neither of them dared to say aloud.

As Preeti boarded the bus, her gaze remained locked with Sarfaraz's until the vehicle slowly pulled away, disappearing from view. Sarfaraz stood there, his arm still raised in a forlorn wave, the weight of her absence settling over him like a cold shadow. He knew, with a sinking feeling, that the future was uncertain, and the life they had imagined sharing was now as intangible as the sea breeze that had once tousled their hair on that beach. Yet, as soon as he returned home, he poured his heart onto paper, writing the first of what would become a treasured collection of letters between the two.

Weeks turned into months as Sarfaraz and Preeti exchanged letters, each word a bridge across the miles that separated them. Through these letters, they shared the smallest details of their lives, their hopes, and their dreams, their bond deepening with each passing day. The letters became more than just ink on paper—they were lifelines, binding their hearts across the vast distance. Every letter from Preeti felt like a tangible piece of her presence, as if she were there with him, laughing, talking, and feeling.

But then, as life often does, fate intervened in the cruellest of ways. Militancy erupted in Kashmir, disrupting the fragile peace that had allowed their correspondence to flourish. Suddenly, the letters stopped coming. At first, Sarfaraz held onto hope, waiting eagerly by the post-box for any sign of Preeti. Days stretched into weeks, and weeks into months, but Preeti's words never came. The silence was unbearable, a void that swallowed their love whole.

Desperately, Sarfaraz tried to reach out, sending letter after letter, hoping for any news of her, but his efforts were met with nothing but silence. It was as if Preeti had vanished, leaving behind only the memories of their time together and the bittersweet echo of her last letter. Despite the uncertainty, despite the aching void that grew with every passing day, Preeti remained etched into Sarfaraz's heart. Her absence became a ghostly

presence that lingered in his life—a haunting reminder of what they had shared and what had been lost.

Years passed, but the memory of Mangalore and the magic of those few fleeting days stayed with Sarfaraz. Mangalore was no longer just a place in his mind; it had become a sacred ground in his heart, the backdrop to a love that had once bloomed brightly, only to be torn apart by forces beyond their control. The festival that had brought them together would always remain a symbol of what could have been, a reminder of the brief and beautiful love they had nurtured.

Preeti, to Sarfaraz, would always be like a melody—beautiful, haunting, and unforgettable. Together, they had composed a song, one that echoed with the promises of a love that transcended the boundaries of time and distance, a love that could not be erased, even by the silence of lost communication. Though the world moved on, and though Sarfaraz's life continued, a part of him would always remain on that sunlit beach, standing beside Preeti, with the waves lapping at their feet and their hearts full of unspoken words that only time could truly understand. Preeti had come into his life like a song, and together they had created a melody of their own, one filled with the promise of something more than friendship.

As Sarfaraz sat in his room, lost in the memories of that trip, he realized how much those days had shaped him. The friendships, the experiences, the sense of wonder—all of it had left an indelible mark on his soul. And though the years had passed, and the people from those days had scattered across different paths, the memories remained, tucked away like the photograph he had just rediscovered.

With a sigh, Sarfaraz carefully closed the album and placed it back on the table. He had found more than just a shawl that day—he had found a window to his past, a reminder of the richness of life's experiences, and the joy of memories that

continue to live on, long after the moments themselves have passed.

His thoughts inevitably drifted to Preeti, he wondered where she was now, if she had found happiness, and whether she ever thought of him. Did her heart still carry any trace of their shared moments, or had they faded like the photographs themselves, replaced by new memories, new faces? Time has a cruel way of moving forward without waiting for those it leaves behind.

With a sigh that was part exhaustion and part resignation, Sarfaraz lay back on the bed, staring at the ceiling, his mind awash in memories. The weight of the past pressed down on him—not in a way that suffocated, but in a way that filled the room with a quiet, melancholy beauty. As sleep began to claim him, Sarfaraz surrendered to it willingly, knowing that even in dreams, the echoes of his journey would continue to resonate. The faces, the voices, the laughter—all of it would remain with him, stitched into the very fabric of his being, long after the present moment dissolved into the quiet hum of the night. In that gentle embrace of sleep, he felt at peace, knowing that his memories, though fragile, were eternal in their own way, a testament to the life he had lived and the love he had known.



It is Never Too Late



I was in the 9th grade, seated on the first row with my friend Ashraf besides me. Our English teacher, Usha madam, was providing a lesson on indefinite tense. She wrote the following on the blackboard:

I like it

You like it

He/She likes it

We like it

They like it

As I turned casually to my right, my attention was caught by a stunning girl who had recently joined our class. She was also seated on the first row along with Amrita.

She had an air of elegance that immediately captivated me. Her shiny black hair cascaded down her shoulders, framing her delicate face perfectly. Her eyes, as deep and mysterious as the night sky, twinkled with intelligence and curiosity.

With every word Usha Madam uttered, I found it increasingly difficult to concentrate on the lesson. My gaze kept drifting towards her, who seemed absorbed in the lecture, her brows furrowed in concentration. Ashraf, being the observant friend that he was, noticed my distracted state and nudged me teasingly. I blushed, trying to divert my attention back to the lesson.

But my efforts were in vain, as her presence continued to draw me in like a moth to a flame. I couldn't help but wonder what her interests were, what books she liked to read, and what her dreams for the future were. I yearned to learn more about her, to unravel the mystery behind those sparkling eyes.

As the bell rang, signalling the end of the class, I gathered my courage and decided to strike up a conversation with her. With my heart pounding in my chest, I approached her, hoping to make a good impression. However, before I could utter a single word, Amrita grabbed her by the arm and they hurriedly left the classroom, leaving me standing there feeling dejected.

Determined not to let this setback discourage me, I made it my mission to find an opportunity to talk to her again.

Amrita and I were on good terms, frequently swapping study materials. While she excelled in science, my strength lay in mathematics. She often sought my help with math.

Since that memorable day, my school attendance became unwavering; a newfound eagerness permeated my mornings as I anticipated the opportunity to catch another glimpse of her.

One day, Amrita and she walked into the classroom, laughing about something, unaware of my presence. Gathering all my courage, I mustered a smile and approached them, my heart racing.

"Hi, Amrita. Could you please lend me your science copy?" I ventured, as she graciously opened her bag and handed over the coveted material. In that moment, my eyes couldn't help but drift towards her companion, and I decided to engage in a conversation.

Noticing the girl's recent arrival, I inquired, "You've joined us recently. How are you finding our school?"

With a nonchalant "nice," she responded, prompting me to delve further.

"May I know your name?" I asked, hoping to extend the dialogue.

Glancing briefly at Amrita before answering, she revealed, "Rabia."

Internally, I marvelled at the beauty of her name, silently acknowledging its uniqueness. Although I anticipated a reciprocal curiosity about my identity, she remained reticent on that front.

Undeterred, the next day, I returned Amrita's copy, offering a friendly greeting to both of them. It became my mission to seize every opportunity to draw nearer to their circle. I strategically positioned myself, ever eager to forge a connection. Yet, amidst my persistent efforts, I yearned for that elusive moment when I could encounter Rabia alone, allowing our connection to transcend the bounds of casual encounters.

One afternoon, fate smiled upon me, finding Rabia alone on the school grounds. Summoning courage, I approached her.

"Hi, Rabia! Why are you sitting alone?" I inquired.

"Amrita had to deposit a fee in the admin office," she explained.

"Can I join you?" I asked.

"Yes, of course."

Seating myself beside her, I remarked, "I'm sorry to interrupt, but I couldn't help but notice your passion for learning during Usha Madam's class. I'm curious, do you enjoy studying English?" I inquired, striving to sound calm and confident.

A surprised yet genuine smile graced Rabia's face as she turned to me. "Yes! English has always been one of my favourite subjects. I find it fascinating how words can express so much and shape our understanding of the world."

Amrita, who had silently joined us, added, "Rabia's obsession with books and writing is simply unparalleled."

Following that, I took a deep interest in the English language. Every night, in anticipation of Usha Madam's English class, I would meticulously prepare, ensuring that I had absorbed as much knowledge as possible, just so I could ask her questions and delve deeper into the subject. It had become a routine for me, and my English copy was always at the ready, and I consistently submitted it first, all driven by the desire to impress Rabia. I couldn't help but want to impress her in any way I could. It was as if her mere presence ignited a fire within me, urging me to go above and beyond to catch her eye.

One fine morning, as I was stepping foot inside the school premises, a voice called me from behind. As I turned around and to my astonishment, it was Rabia herself. For a moment, I couldn't believe my luck, but I composed myself and greeted her with a warm smile. She approached me, her eyes filled with a glimmer of curiosity, and she spoke in a gentle tone, "Hi! I wanted to talk to you about something. Is it possible for you to lend me your English copy for a few days?"

Surprised yet elated by her request, I struggled to contain my excitement. However, I didn't want to appear overly eager, so I took a deep breath and replied, "Sure, I can do that." With those words, a sense of accomplishment washed over me, knowing that this small act could potentially bring us closer.

We walked together towards the classroom, our footsteps in sync. As I handed over my English copy to Rabia, I couldn't help but steal glances at her, hoping to catch a glimpse of her reaction. She thanked me graciously, her voice laced with genuine appreciation.

Little did I know that this seemingly inconsequential exchange would mark the beginning of a friendship that would transcend the boundaries of language and academia. Our shared

connection through my English copy became a catalyst for countless conversations, debates, and moments of growth. Rabia's curiosity and eagerness to learn ignited a spark within me, further fuelling my love for English.

We embarked on a journey of self-discovery. Lending Rabia my English copy was far more than just a simple act of kindness. It was a pivotal moment that allowed us to forge a bond built on trust, shared passions, and a desire to see each other thrive.

Through those shared moments, I discovered that Rabia was not just beautiful on the outside, but also possessed a kind and compassionate soul. She had a knack for making people feel heard and understood, and I quickly found myself opening up to her in ways I had never imagined.

As the months passed by, Rabia and I became inseparable. Our friendship blossomed into something deeper, and the butterflies in my stomach evolved into a love that consumed my every thought. Together, we found solace in each other's presence, and Rabia became my anchor in the stormy sea of adolescence.

During three days for a relative's wedding, when I returned, Usha Madam had covered the questions of a chapter. Unable to find my own copy, I borrowed Rabia's English notebook and painstakingly transcribed her notes. As I reached the last page, a sudden inspiration struck me and I scribbled, "It is never too late."

Returning her notebook, the following day, I thought little of my impulsive act. Days passed with no mention of my note, leading me to believe that she may not have read it. However, on the third day, as I stood on the school grounds, she approached me with a hint of curiosity in her eyes.

"Why did you write that in my notebook?" she asked, her voice laced with intrigue.

Caught off guard, I struggled to find the right words. After a moment of hesitation, I mustered the courage to respond, "I meant that it is never too late for us to develop feelings for each other. I like you, and I was wondering if you felt the same way." My gaze fell to the ground, unable to meet her eyes.

A smile graced her lips, a smile unique to her and capable of lighting up the darkest corners of my world. "I do," she replied, her words resonating with a magnetism that left me breathless.

As her affirmation reached my ears, a spark danced within me, igniting a fire that burned brighter than ever before. The mesmerizing sound of her acceptance echoed in my ears, reverberating throughout my being. It was a moment of pure enchantment as if time itself had paused to witness the birth of something extraordinary.

From that day onward, she became my source of endless joy and tranquility. Each passing day with her was a testament to the profound connection we shared, a bond that only strengthened with time. Her presence brought comfort and stability, guiding me through the tempestuous seas of adolescence and illuminating my path toward a brighter future.

In her, I had found someone who understood the depths of my soul, someone who brought solace to my troubled heart. Our love grew, deep and unwavering, ensuring that no matter how turbulent the sea of life became, we would always find solace in each other's embrace.

She had forever changed the course of my life. Through her love and unwavering support, she transformed the tempestuous chaos of my adolescence into a journey filled with beauty, love, and endless possibilities.

It was the starting point of a journey that would shape not only my academic pursuits but also the course of my heart. In Rabia, I found a friend, a confidante, and a soulmate - someone

who would become an integral part of my life, inspiring me to strive for greatness and reminding me of the power of love and connection.

During our routine lunch breaks, Rabia would enthusiastically divulge the intricacies of her daily activities. Despite a tinge of envy emanating from certain students in my direction, I remained largely indifferent to their sentiments. Rabia and I would exchange mathematics notes, and occasionally, I found myself completing her assignments as she reciprocated the favour. This symbiotic academic collaboration embodied the language of two hearts expressing their affection.

As time flew by at lightning speed, our camaraderie deepened, reaching its zenith during the exam season. Rabia, Amrita, and I seamlessly shared notes and exam strategies, forming an unbreakable bond. However, the culmination of our efforts brought forth results that echoed both triumph and bittersweet separation. Rabia claimed the top spot, while I secured the third position. Subsequently, a period of respite followed the exams.

Upon entering a new class, my focus waned without Rabia's presence. Alarming concerns arose when she was absent for four consecutive days. On the fifth day, I approached Amrita during our lunch break. To my disbelief, Amrita revealed that Rabia had left the school due to her father's transfer.

A wave of dejection and brokenness engulfed me. The tears threatened to spill, yet I valiantly resisted, grappling with the abrupt void left by Rabia's departure.

It felt as if a part of me had suddenly been ripped away, leaving a void that seemed impossible to fill. Rabia, my closest friend and companion, was gone. The bond we had formed felt like an unbreakable thread, woven through countless laughs, shared secrets, and moments of solace. And now, that thread had unravelled, leaving me feeling lost and alone.

Every corner of the school, every empty seat at lunch, and every laugh shared among friends served as a painful reminder of the void she had left behind. The notes that once exchanged hands between us felt heavy with the weight of nostalgia, reminding me of the countless moments we had spent together, supporting and encouraging each other to reach our fullest potential.

But life, as it always does, moved forward. I couldn't escape the longing in my heart for Rabia. The world around me appeared dreary and lifeless. My gaze casually drifted towards Amrita, who was engrossed in her notebook. However, something caught my gaze as I turned my head. There was a girl named Nazia, who seemed to radiate a beauty that surpassed anyone I had ever seen before. A spark ignited within me, a curiosity that urged me to know more about her. I couldn't help but watch her, day after day, and it seemed like she was watching me too.

It was on a sunny day when the warmth of the sun reflected the hope in my heart, that I summoned the courage to approach Nazia. As if fate itself had conspired, she was alone, just as I had hoped. With a nervous smile, I asked if she would lend me her social studies notebook. To my delight, she willingly handed it over, her eyes gleaming with a hint of curiosity.

The following day, I carefully returned her notebook, making sure to leave a message for her on the last page. "It is never too late," I wrote, hoping that those words would resonate with her just as they had with me. Little did I know that those words would become the catalyst for a magical journey that awaited us.

To my surprise, Nazia responded to my message with a smile that melted even my deepest fears and insecurities. As we began spending more time together, our connection grew stronger with each passing day. Conversations flowed effortlessly, laughter filled the air, and it felt as though we had known each other for a lifetime.



Unbreakable Friendship



In the picturesque embrace of the Jhelum River, a heartwarming tale of friendship unfolds—a tale that begins in the uncomplicated innocence of childhood and weaves itself through the complexities of life, binding two souls, Kuldeep Raina and Naveed Nazir, in an unbreakable bond. Their intertwined destinies began on the sun-drenched banks of this serene river, where laughter echoed under the shade of willow trees, and dreams rippled across the shimmering waters.

Kuldeep's home rested along the roadside, a modest dwelling that stood as a testament to his family's industrious spirit. His father, Hiralal Raina, ran a bustling shop selling ready-made garments just a stone's throw away from their home, engaging in lively exchanges with customers and casting a warm, welcoming aura that permeated the air. The shop was not merely a place of business but a hub of community life where conversations flowed as freely as the scenic river just beyond, bringing a sense of camaraderie to all who entered.

Across from Kuldeep's home, perched right on the riverbank, was Naveed's family abode. The sound of the gently lapping water acted as a soothing lullaby, and the breathtaking views inspired countless adventures. Naveed's father, Nazir Ahmad, served as a dedicated government employee, his work ethos instilling a sense of responsibility and care for the community he loved so dearly.

From the very beginning, Kuldeep and Naveed found themselves drawn to one another. Their childhood days were filled with sun-soaked adventures—barefoot races along the banks of the river, impromptu fishing trips with makeshift rods, and afternoons spent uncovering hidden treasures beneath the sprawling willow trees. It was a magical time; their imaginations ran wild as they built forts from branches and leaves, creating realms where they were the heroes of their own tales.

Aside from their strong bond, the two friends also had sisters who shared a close friendship as well. Naveed had two sisters named Kulsum and Afroza, while Kuldeep had a single sister named Nimi. The girls cherished their time together, strengthening the family connection.

Their enduring friendship extended beyond the everyday routines, as they made it a point to celebrate festivals together. The festival of Eid was a special time for both boys. At the break of dawn, they would head to the Eidgah, the early morning chill juxtaposed with the warmth of their shared excitement. Naveed would offer his prayers, the rhythmic cadence of the holy words weaving through the air, while Kuldeep stood by, respectfully waiting. Once the prayers were over, they would plunge into the day with fervour, exploring their town with the boundless energy of youth, their laughter echoing through the bustling streets.

Equally significant was the annual pilgrimage to Tulmulla for the Kheer Bhawani Mela, a vibrant celebration that painted their world with hues of devotion and festivity. Hand in hand, they navigated the sea of pilgrims, the sacredness of the journey deepening their connection. This was a tradition they never missed, a testament to their unwavering friendship and mutual respect for each other's beliefs.

Kuldeep's family embraced Naveed with open arms, making him a part of their celebrations. On Herath, Kuldeep's mother would personally invite Naveed, ensuring he felt the

warmth and love of their household during the festivities. The bonds of friendship, respect, and shared experiences knit their lives together, creating a tapestry of enduring companionship that transcended all boundaries.

Once Kuldeep Raina and Naveed Nazir completed their education, their paths diverged as they pursued different career paths. Kuldeep, with his steadfast determination and diligent efforts, secured a coveted government job. The stability and prestige associated with this role offered him a sense of security and fulfillment. On the other hand, Naveed, driven by an entrepreneurial spirit and an insatiable hunger for success, ventured into the business world. His journey was marked by risk-taking, innovation, and a relentless pursuit of his dreams.

Despite the divergence in their professional lives, the bond between Kuldeep and Naveed remained as strong as ever. Their friendship, forged during their formative years, withstood the test of time and circumstance. Every evening, after the day's demands had been met, they would reunite. In the quiet comfort of these moments, they shared stories of triumphs and tribulations, offering each other a listening ear and sage advice. This ritual became their refuge, a sacred time when they could unwind and draw strength from the depth of their connection.

When Naveed's business faced a major setback due to unforeseen circumstances, Kuldeep was there to support him emotionally and financially. He extended a helping hand without hesitation, understanding the importance of loyalty and friendship during tough times.

Similarly, when Kuldeep faced a personal tragedy with the loss of his father, it was Naveed who became his rock. He stood beside his friend, offering solace and strength in those dark days. Naveed's presence provided a comfort that words could not, embodying the compassion and empathy that defined their friendship.

Their journeys, though distinct, were interwoven by the threads of mutual respect, support, and an unbreakable bond. Through the highs and lows, Kuldeep and Naveed exemplified the true meaning of friendship, proving that while life's paths may diverge, the essence of true companionship remains constant and enduring.

Dark clouds began to loom over the peaceful land of Kashmir. The once harmonious atmosphere suddenly changed, as violence erupted and people who were once peace-loving took up arms. Kashmiri Pandits, a minority group, became the target of heinous acts, causing widespread fear and terror.

Kuldeep had grown up amidst the breathtaking valleys and had witnessed the coexistence of different cultures and religions. However, the escalating violence began to shatter the tranquility he had known. The constant news of killings and bloodshed sent chills down his spine.

Despite his growing fear, Naveed Nazir fervently urged him not to abandon their beloved land. Naveed believed that their presence in Kashmir could help inspire change and promote unity among the diverse communities. With hope in his heart, Kuldeep hesitated to leave, wanting to join the resistance against the rising brutality.

Yet, tragedy struck when Ratan Lal, Kuldeep's next-door neighbour and a fellow Kashmiri Pandit, fell victim to the senseless violence. Ratan Lal, a gentle soul who had always radiated kindness, was ruthlessly killed upon returning to his own home. The shock and grief that reverberated through the community left Kuldeep shattered, his faith in humanity waning.

In the wake of Ratan Lal's death, Kuldeep found himself paralyzed with fear and anguish. The horrifying realization that no one was safe, regardless of their religious or cultural background,

became clearer to him than ever before. The thought of leaving behind his home, his memories, and his cherished friendships was heart-wrenching. But the fear of becoming yet another casualty of the unforgiving conflict became unbearable.

Under the cloak of darkness, shrouded by the stillness of the night, Kuldeep made the heartbreaking decision to leave Kashmir without informing Naveed. Reluctantly, he packed a bag with only the essentials, leaving behind traces of his existence as he prepared to embark on a journey toward an uncertain future.

As he along with his family silently walked away from the place, he once called home, Kuldeep carried a heavy burden of grief and loss. While his departure may have been an act of self-preservation, it was also a symbol of the erosion of trust and coexistence that had defined Kashmir for generations.

Leaving behind his home and his childhood friend etched in his mind, Kuldeep bid adieu to the once peaceful valley, hoping that someday peace would be restored, and people could live without the constant fear of violence. Little did he know that his departure marked the beginning of a new chapter, not only for himself but for the land that had been ravaged by turmoil and tragedy.

When Naveed learned that his dear friend Kuldeep had left for Jammu under the cover of night, he was utterly shocked and disbelieved the news. Hastening to Kuldeep's home, Naveed found that everything remained as it was, undisturbed. Deeply concerned, he took it upon himself to look after Kuldeep's abode in his absence.

The unrest and violence that had gripped Kashmir showed no signs of abating. Each day brought tidings of more bloodshed, as militants continued their campaign of terror, mercilessly taking the lives of innocent civilians. The pervasive sense of fear and uncertainty cast a dark pall over the entire region, leaving Naveed

and the rest of the community deeply unsettled and saddened by the unfolding tragedies.

Naveed's heart was heavy with the knowledge that his dear friend had felt compelled to flee the relentless violence, abandoning the comfort and familiarity of his home. As he dutifully tended to Kuldeep's property, Naveed couldn't help but wonder when, if ever, the people of Kashmir would find respite from the endless cycle of conflict and turmoil that had come to define their daily lives.

One crisp, early morning, Naveed decided to embark on a journey to Jammu to find his friend. His heart was set on meeting his dear friend, Kuldeep, who was forced to flee his home due to the prevailing violence and unrest. Determined to reconnect with his longtime companion, Naveed rose early, packed a small bag, and headed to the bustling Lal Chowk, the heart of Srinagar, where he boarded a crowded bus bound for Jammu.

The journey was long and arduous, with the bus navigating the winding mountain roads and passing through picturesque villages. Naveed watched the landscape change from the lush, snow-capped peaks of Kashmir to the rolling foothills of the Himalayas. As the sun began to dip below the horizon, the bus finally pulled into the busy streets of Jammu, and Naveed disembarked, his eyes scanning the unfamiliar surroundings.

Weary from the long trip, Naveed made his way to the bustling Raghunath Bazaar and found a room at the quaint Hotel Amar Palace, where he spent the night, his mind filled with thoughts of his friend.

The following morning, Naveed rose early and set out to the Parade Bazaar, a well-known gathering place for Kashmiri Pandits who had been displaced from their homes. As he walked through the crowded market, he inquired about Kuldeep, hoping to find any leads on his whereabouts. Finally, a kind-hearted Kashmiri woman informed him that Kuldeep and his family had

sought refuge in the Purkhoo Camp, a sprawling settlement on the outskirts of the city.

Without hesitation, Naveed hurried to the Purkhoo Camp, navigating the maze of tents and makeshift shelters, his eyes searching for any familiar faces. After traversing the camp, he finally spotted Kuldeep, sitting outside his tent with his family. Overjoyed, the two friends embraced, their reunion filled with a mixture of relief, joy, and the bittersweet reality of the circumstances that had brought them together.

Naveed could see the strain and uncertainty etched on Kuldeep's face, a poignant reflection of the trauma and upheaval he had endured. The sight of Kuldeep and his family living in squalid conditions, crammed into canvas tents with no access to basic amenities like a kitchen, bathroom, or reliable water supply, was a heartbreaking revelation for Naveed. He felt a deep sense of helplessness, unsure of how to alleviate their suffering, especially since the situation in Kashmir remained volatile and unpredictable.

Determined to provide some measure of relief, Naveed spent a week in Jammu, working tirelessly to secure a modest one-bedroom rented accommodation for Kuldeep and his family. The transition from the makeshift camp to a more stable living arrangement, though modest, seemed to lift some of the burden from Kuldeep's shoulders. As Naveed prepared to return to Srinagar, the two friends shared a tearful farewell at the bus stand, their embrace conveying the depth of their bond and the shared experiences that had forged it.

Upon his return to Srinagar, Naveed's heart sank when he learned that unknown assailants had targeted Kuldeep's home, reducing the house to ashes in a devastating act of violence. The news was a crushing blow, a stark reminder of the fragility and uncertainty that had become the hallmark of their lives in the tumultuous aftermath of the ongoing conflict that had gripped the region.

Naveed felt a profound sense of anguish, as he had spent many cherished days in that very house over the years. He fondly recalled the good old days when he and Kuldeep would spend hours studying together in the cozy reading room, the aroma of Kuldeep's mother's freshly brewed tea wafting through the air as she would gently knock and enter the room, placing the tray of steaming cups between them. Naveed remembered how Kuldeep's room had been adorned with photos of various spiritual figures, a large portrait of the Sherawali Maa prominently displayed on the left side of the almirah.

As Naveed stood amidst the ruins of the once vibrant home, he was overwhelmed by a deep sense of sorrow. Not only had Kuldeep's home been reduced to ashes, but he had also learned that four other individuals had been killed by militants in the area. Naveed found himself questioning the direction in which their beloved homeland was headed, the spiral of violence and destruction leaving him deeply unsettled and disturbed.

That evening, Naveed could not bring himself to eat a single morsel, retiring to his bed with a heavy heart and an empty stomach, the weight of the day's events bearing down upon him. As the night wore on, Naveed's anguish and distress only deepened, his sleep eluding him as he tossed and turned, consumed by the grim realities that had unfolded.

The next morning, when Naveed failed to rise from his slumber, his worried mother went upstairs to rouse him, only to find him lifeless, the grief and anguish of the previous day had taken a devastating toll on his fragile state of mind. Naveed's untimely passing served as a poignant testament to the immense human cost of the ongoing conflict, a tragic loss that reverberated through the community, leaving behind a profound sense of sorrow and disbelief.



Thief at Molvi's Home



Yahya's family history was a fascinating blend of different cultures and religions. His great-grandfather, Sohan Lal Raina, was a devout Hindu, who had two sons and two daughters. Growing up, Yahya was always intrigued by his family's diverse background.

It was Mohan Lal Raina, one of Sohan Lal's sons, who fell deeply in love with Saleema Bano, a Muslim girl in their village. Their love was unconventional, as they had to express their feelings through secret glances and silent conversations. They found solace in stolen moments by the rivulet, where Saleema would come to fetch water.

In those days, before the advent of widespread tap water in Kashmir, people relied on rivers, rivulets, and springs. The *yarbal*, a passage leading down to a river, was more than just a source of water; it was a social hub, especially for women. For Mohan Lal, it became a sacred place, for it was here that he first saw Saleema.

Day after day, Mohan Lal would spend hours near the *yarbal*, waiting for the brief moments when Saleema would arrive to fetch water. His heart would race as he watched her from a distance, and she, too, would steal shy glances in his direction.

One day, when Saleema was alone at the rivulet, Mohan Lal could no longer contain his emotions and confessed his love to her. Surprised yet elated, Saleema admitted she felt the same way. From that moment on, their love story started to unfold. As news

of their relationship spread throughout the community, the elders took notice and sternly reprimanded both sets of parents.

Saleema's parents, fearing the societal backlash and the potential consequences for their daughter, prohibited her from leaving the house. However, Mohan Lal was determined to marry her and continued to search for a way to convince Saleema's parents.

With time, Mohan Lal's patience began to wane, and he decided to take a different approach. He sent a trusted friend to Saleema's home to propose marriage formally. Unfortunately, Saleema's parents rejected the proposal.

Undeterred by the rejection, Mohan Lal took one last desperate measure to win Saleema's hand. He sought the help of the local Molvi Sahib, an Islamic religious leader, and shared his heartfelt desire to marry Saleema. Mohan Lal was ready to embrace Islam if it meant being able to unite with the love of his life.

After much contemplation and discussion, the Molvi Sahib agreed to assist Mohan Lal. He guided him through the conversion process and helped him understand the principles and beliefs of Islam. Finally, Mohan Lal converted to Islam and was given the name Mohammad Mohsin Raina. His conversion stirred a storm within the local Hindu community, which tried every possible means to dissuade him. Despite the protest and ostracism, Mohsin remained resolute in his decision.

With his newfound faith, Mohammad Mohsin Raina and Saleema were finally able to marry and live their lives together. The hardships they faced only made their love stronger, and their union became a symbol of hope and resilience in the face of adversity. Their love story beautifully demonstrated that love holds a profound power that surpasses religious faith.

Yahya, now a proud descendant of Mohammad Mohsin Raina and Saleema Bano, grew up hearing this incredible love story that transcended religious boundaries. It taught him the power of love, understanding, and the importance of embracing diversity.

As Yahya reflects on his family's journey, he is grateful for the sacrifices made by his ancestors. Their love story serves as a reminder that love isn't about sameness but about celebrating the uniqueness in one another, and that true happiness can be found by embracing each other's differences.

Yahya, being a man of diverse cultural background, had always had a more relaxed approach towards his faith. He wasn't a staunch follower of Islam, often neglecting his responsibilities such as praying five times a day. The only time he would step foot inside a mosque was on Fridays, and even that was due to societal pressures and the fear of judgment from others.

His primary focus was always his job and his family. He worked tirelessly to provide for his wife, Shabnum, and his beautiful daughter, Azeem Baha. His ultimate goal in life was to ensure their happiness and well-being, even if it meant compromising on certain aspects of his religious beliefs.

One winter, when the snow had fallen heavily, enveloping everything in a pristine white blanket, Yahya decided to take his family to the picturesque town of Gulmarg. He spent days researching and planning their trip, eventually booking a cozy hut amidst the snow-covered mountains for three days of blissful family time.

During their stay in Gulmarg, Yahya's family experienced moments of pure joy and contentment. They played in the snow, went skiing, and indulged in hot chocolate by the fireside. Wrapped in layers of warm clothing, Yahya's beautiful daughter squealed with delight as her father playfully rolled her down the snowy slopes of Gulmarg. The pure joy in her eyes was

contagious, spreading warmth throughout the family. As they laughed together.

It was Baha, the mischievous little one with infectious laughter, who truly enlivened their experiences in Gulmarg. Unbeknownst to her mother, she slyly slipped a snowball into her frock, giggling mischievously with anticipation. Soon enough, during a light-hearted snowball fight, the unsuspecting mother was taken by surprise, prompting laughter and playful retaliation from the entire family.

With every passing day, as they explored the magical snow-covered valley, Baha's love for the enchanting snowy playground grew stronger. Her enthusiasm was unmatched as she sculpted miniature snowmen, built intricate snow forts, and even attempted her own version of skiing, albeit with a considerable number of tumbles. For those few days, life felt perfect, and their worries seemed far away.

Yahya and Shabnum were transported back to their own youthful days. They were reminded of their honeymoon, a magical time when they first visited Gulmarg after their marriage. The snow-clad valley held a special place in their hearts, a symbol of their love and the beginning of their journey together. As they revelled in the beauty of the landscape and shared stories by the fire, they felt a renewed connection, their bond strengthened by the memories of the past and the joys of the present.

As their stay in Gulmarg drew to an end, an undeniable sense of gratitude swelled within each family member. They had been blessed with days so flawless and joyous that the memories would forever be etched in their hearts. The bond between Yahya, his wife, and their beautiful daughter had grown stronger, invigorated by the shared experiences and laughter that had filled their days in Gulmarg.

However, upon returning home, their blissful bubble quickly burst. Yahya was devastated to find that thieves had

broken into their house and ransacked it completely, leaving behind nothing but emptiness and despair. Even their clothes had been stolen, leaving the family vulnerable and confused.

Yahya was faced with the immense challenge of rebuilding their lives from scratch. He had to repurchase everything they had lost and provide his family with the necessities for survival. With a heavy heart, he started purchasing the basics, making sure they had food, shelter, and warmth. He also bought some new clothes for his daughter, wanting to preserve some sense of normalcy for her amidst the chaos.

During this challenging time, Yahya's neighbours and acquaintances visited him to console and support him. They shared their sympathies and offered their help in any way possible. Among them was Molvi Sahib, a respected religious scholar in the community.

Molvi Sahib, deeply concerned about the theft and the moral degradation in society, felt compelled to address the issue with Yahya and others gathered in the room. He expressed his worry and shared with them his belief that the decline in moral values was directly linked to people's laxity in following the principles of Islam.

"The challenges we face in society today," Molvi Sahib began slowly, "are a result of our inability to adhere strictly to the teachings of Islam. Our neglect of our religious duties has opened doors for corruption and immorality. Allah promises that if we pay Zakat, give to the needy, and lead a devout life, our property and possessions will be protected."

Yahya listened to Molvi Sahib's words, an expression of scepticism appearing on his face. He pondered over the idea but found it difficult to fully accept it. After all, his personal experiences seemed contradictory to this promise. His family's theft had occurred despite their prayers and occasional visits to the mosque.

Although Yahya couldn't wholeheartedly embrace Molvi Sahib's perspective at that moment, the conversation stayed with him. He started reflecting upon his own actions, questioning whether he had truly been living per his faith. He considered how his neglect of religious obligations might have contributed to the chaotic circumstances they found themselves in.

Over time, Yahya began to realize that he had placed too much emphasis on worldly matters and had unintentionally distanced himself from his spirituality. He understood that following Islam was not merely about rituals and prayers; it was a way of life that brought peace, harmony, and protection.

One day, news spread in the vicinity that Molvi Sahib's house had been ransacked, leaving Yahya surprised. Recalling Molvi Sahib's words about divine protection for those who pay Zakat, Yahya couldn't resist questioning, "Does he not pay Zakat?"

Curiosity drove Yahya decided to visit Molvi Sahib's home. Upon entering, he was warmly greeted by Molvi Sahib's son, who led him to the room where his father was sitting. As Yahya entered, he noticed a few others present. Molvi Sahib, avoiding eye contact, seemed unable to face Yahya, perhaps remembering his own words from when Yahya's house had been ransacked. With a polite yet pointed gesture, Yahya said, "Molvi Sahib, if you need anything, please feel free to ask."

With that, Yahya left the room, subtly making Molvi Sahib realize that thieves could target any home, regardless of religious practices.



An Atheist



Arif was born and raised in a uniquely progressive, liberal household where strict religious observance was never forced upon him as a child. His father, a staunch secular man, believed deeply in rationalism and the rejection of religious dogma, while his uncle held firm communist convictions, viewing religion as an instrument of social control. Consequently, Arif grew up in a home where formal religious education was completely absent. The ideas and discussions that shaped his early years were far more focused on philosophy, politics, and humanism than on any spiritual or theological matters.

From a very young age, Arif was a keen observer of the intellectual debates that often unfolded between his father and uncle. These heated, passionate conversations were an integral part of the household, and they explored various topics ranging from atheism and secular humanism to social justice and class struggle. Arif found himself captivated by these debates, and even as a child, he was exposed to an environment where questioning was encouraged, and blind faith had no place. As a result, the concepts of atheism, secularism, and rational thought were deeply woven into the fabric of his thinking from an early age.

Growing up in this intellectual atmosphere, Arif naturally developed a critical and inquisitive mindset and was constantly encouraged to question, analyze, and form his own opinions about the world around him. The discourse at home instilled in him a profound respect for evidence-based reasoning, as well as a willingness to engage with diverse perspectives. His father's

commitment to secularism and his uncle's belief in the materialist dialectic left an indelible mark on Arif's formative years, and by the time he reached adolescence, he had already embraced atheism wholeheartedly.

As Arif matured, his intellectual journey deepened. He sought out books and texts that further challenged the existence of God and religion, devouring literature by philosophers, scientists, and thinkers who rejected the supernatural. His quest for knowledge led him to firmly reject any notion of a higher power or divine plan. Arif became a staunch atheist, convinced that religion was little more than a comforting illusion, an outdated relic of a time when humanity lacked the knowledge and tools to understand the universe through science and reason.

In contrast, Arif's brother, Inam, took a different path. Although not particularly religious or dogmatic, Inam held moderate beliefs and found a sense of peace and solace in spiritual practices. While he did not adhere strictly to the religious tradition, Inam was drawn to the rituals and cultural aspects of faith. He would occasionally visit religious shrines, seeking blessings and feeling a quiet connection to something greater than himself, even though he wasn't fanatical in his beliefs. Inam's moderate spirituality stood in stark contrast to Arif's uncompromising atheism.

Despite these differences, the brothers coexisted peacefully, respecting each other's views. Their bond remained strong, and their divergent beliefs rarely led to serious conflict. However, while Inam maintained his quiet spirituality, Arif's rejection of religion grew more intense over time. He took a militant stance on atheism, not just declining to participate in religious functions, but actively mocking believers. For Arif, religious people were deluded, and he often referred to them as ignorant or superstitious, unable to see the "truth" of a universe without gods or supernatural forces.

Arif's mocking attitude towards religion often alienated him from those around him. His relentless sarcasm and dismissive

remarks made it difficult for others to engage with him on matters of faith, leading to strained relationships. While his brother might participate in such activities with a sense of cultural respect or tradition, Arif refused outright, viewing it as a betrayal of his own principles. He saw religious practices not just as useless rituals but as dangerous perpetuations of falsehoods that hindered human progress. He believed that religion stands as a wall between man and the path of progress.

Life seemed to progress smoothly for the two brothers. They had found a way to live harmoniously, each following his own path without letting it interfere with their relationship. Arif was an engineer by profession—methodical and focused, immersed in blueprints and technical precision. On the other hand, Inam was a contractor—charismatic and hands-on, always at the heart of construction sites, surrounded by workers and scaffolding. Despite their busy schedules, they cherished their familial bond and lived side by side, both literally and figuratively.

Their homes, two beautifully designed houses, stood proudly facing each other on the same street, a reflection of their intertwined yet independent lives. It was a rare blessing to have such harmony, not just in their professions but also in their personal lives. Both brothers had built their lives with care, and though their routines differed, their mornings often began with warm greetings exchanged across the street and ended with shared meals or conversations over tea. The rhythm of their lives felt peaceful and steady, like the calm before a storm no one could foresee. However, fate, as it often does, had its own plans. One day, while visiting a construction site where he was overseeing a project, Inam climbed up to the fourth floor to inspect some work. In a tragic accident, his foot slipped, and he fell to the ground, dying on the spot.

Arif was devastated by the sudden and tragic loss of his beloved brother, Inam. The news of Inam's accidental death at the construction site shook him to the core, shattering the peaceful

coexistence they had maintained despite their differing worldviews. And in the deafening silence that followed, Arif was left alone, grappling with emotions he had never truly confronted before.

Though they had walked different spiritual paths, Inam had been his closest companion, the one person who understood him completely despite their differences. Arif was consumed by grief, struggling to reconcile the loss with his rationalist beliefs. For someone who had always dismissed the idea of an afterlife, the finality of death now felt unbearable. The void left by Inam's passing forced Arif to confront the limits of his atheism. He no longer mocked religious beliefs but instead recognized the value of faith as a source of comfort and community for those who found solace in it. Arif's uncompromising atheism had softened, and he had gained a deeper understanding and respect for the diverse ways in which people sought meaning and purpose in their lives.

As the days turned into weeks, Arif's grief deepened. He felt lost, consumed by the weight of his sorrow. In desperation, he sought help from a psychologist, hoping that professional guidance might offer some relief from the overwhelming pain. But even as he attended therapy, Arif's mind began to wander towards something he had never seriously considered before: religion.

Arif no longer mocked the beliefs he once ridiculed. Instead, he began to recognize the power of faith as a source of comfort, a beacon of hope for those navigating the darkest of times. For the first time, he understood why people turned to religion in moments of despair. It wasn't about blind belief or unquestioning devotion; it was about finding meaning, connection, and solace in the face of life's most difficult challenges.

Curiosity led him to religious texts, and he began visiting places of worship, observing the rituals, and listening to the teachings with an open mind. Over time, Arif realized that religion, far from being a mere set of outdated practices, held profound importance, especially in moments of loss and suffering.

It offered answers where none seemed possible and provided a community of support for those who believed.

Slowly, Arif's rigid atheism began to waver. He began to see value in faith—not just as a personal belief system but as a source of strength that could help people weather life's storms. He no longer viewed religion as something to be debunked or ridiculed. Instead, he began to encourage others to explore faith, not necessarily for proof of God's existence but for the comfort and meaning it provided. For him, the spiritual awakening came too late to save his brother, but it gave him the strength to carry on.

One day, as Arif spoke to a group of friends about the importance of belief and faith, one of them challenged him, saying, "Arif, you were always the one who ridiculed religion, always questioning the existence of God. Now here you are, supporting blind faith. What caused this sudden U-turn?"

Arif paused for a moment before answering. "These are two different questions," he began. "If you ask me whether God exists, whether there is some higher power watching over us—honestly, I still think that's debatable. But if you ask me whether one should believe in God, my answer is yes. Blindly, even. Because faith isn't just about proving God's existence; it's about having something to hold onto in times of despair, something to give you strength when everything else falls apart. I didn't understand that until I lost my brother. Faith is an unseen support, a guide when life becomes unbearable."

Arif's journey from unwavering atheism to an embrace of faith was not about resolving the age-old question of God's existence but about recognizing the human need for comfort, connection, and meaning. The loss of Inam had taught him that in a world full of uncertainty, sometimes, belief in something greater than oneself could be the most rational choice of all.



A Morning of Terror



In the stillness of early morning, as the world stirred awake and birds nestled quietly in their nests. Shahid and Aqib lay fast asleep in their warm, cozy beds, the soft crackle of the traditional tin bukhari, fuelled by firewood, adding to the room's tranquil atmosphere.

This tranquil scene was shattered by a loud, insistent knock at the door. At first, it was a faint intrusion, but the knock grew louder and more violent when no one answered.

Startled, their mother, Sameena, hurried to the door. As she swung it open, she froze. Standing before her were two armed men with rifles in their hands, their expressions cold and unyielding. Before she could even comprehend their presence, one of them, an army jawan, barked a question.

"Where are the militants?"

Sameena was startled by this question. "W-which militants?" she stammered, confusion and fear flashing across her face.

The jawan, his tone firm and commanding, pressed on, "Who is hiding inside?" Without waiting for a reply, he barked his next order without hesitation. "Bring all the men outside. There's a crackdown in the area."

The previous night, a fierce gunfight between militants and the military had erupted nearby, and the area had been cordoned off for a full-scale search operation. The tension was palpable. The

army was looking for the militants supposed to be involved in the encounter.

Sameena's heart pounded in her chest, each beat echoing the growing dread that gripped her. The cozy warmth of her home now felt stifling, its safety shattered by the cold, stark reality outside. Steeling herself, she moved quietly, her footsteps barely a whisper as she approached her son's room. Gently, she nudged them awake. "Get up," she whispered, her voice trembling. "There's a search operation. The army is outside. You need to go." Her words trembled, carrying the weight of unspoken fear.

Shahid and Aqib stirred, still groggy with sleep, their faces etched with confusion. The gravity in their mother's voice pulled them from their grogginess. They immediately put on pherans, clutching the kangris tightly for comfort and warmth. Their eyes reflected confusion and fear, a mirror of their mother's unspoken terror.

The two jawans stood vigil outside, their rifles gleaming under the faint light. Shahid and Aqib exchanged a glance, their youthful faces etched with apprehension. The snow outside stretched endlessly, blanketing the village in an eerie silence. With a deep breath, the boys stepped forward, their footsteps muffled by the snow, as they followed the jawans into the ghostly morning.

With every step, an unspoken fear loomed large: What if the soldiers didn't believe them? What if they were accused, branded as something they were not—militants? A thousand such thoughts raced through their minds as they followed the soldiers obediently, their kangris clutched close to their chests as though the embers inside could shield them from the cold reality surrounding them.

When they reached the main road, the boys were handed over to another soldier, a man whose expression was unreadable under the shadow of his helmet. Without a word, he gestured for them to follow, leading them to an open ground blanketed in snow.

The vast emptiness of the space made it feel even more oppressive. The boys looked at each other, their breaths visible in the icy air, fear now a living, breathing thing that clung to them like the cold.

"Sit there," the soldier ordered, pointing to a cement pole partially buried in the snow. Shahid and Aqib brushed off the snow and sat down, clutching their kangris tightly to their chests. The fire pots radiated a faint warmth, but it was little comfort against the chill of fear that gripped them.

As they sat in silence, two more persons joined them—Habibullah, the local auto driver, and his teenage son, Bilal. Unlike Shahid and Aqib, they had no kangris, their trembling hands betraying the cold that seeped into their bones.

Suddenly, the crackling sound of a loudspeaker pierced the cold air as a voice from the local mosque announced, "The army has cordoned off the area. All men are requested to gather at the ground immediately." The announcement echoed through the colony, stirring a ripple of unease. Soon, from every lane and alley, men began to emerge. Clutching their kangris, they trudged through the snow toward the gathering point, their faces etched with anxiety.

The open ground began to fill with people, the once-empty space now a sea of silent figures huddled together. The sun, mercifully, broke through the clouds, casting a faint warmth over the gathering. Yet, the sun's light did little to dispel the oppressive atmosphere.

The soldiers ordered everyone to remain quiet, their voices cutting through the murmurs of the crowd. Shahid, Aqib, and the others sat in tense silence, their breaths visible in the frigid air. The fear of the unknown loomed large, the unspoken question on everyone's mind: What will happen next?

The once-peaceful morning had unravelled into a scene of dread and uncertainty, each moment stretching endlessly as the villagers awaited their fate under the watchful eyes of the armed men.

Two soldiers approached and pinpointed five young, stout boys from the group, among them Shahid. They were taken to a house at the entrance of the ground, which belonged to Irshad Hussaini, a carpet merchant. The army had commandeered his drawing room for interrogating the boys. The selected few were led to the garden of the house, instructed to drape their phirans over their heads, and lined up.

The first boy was ushered into the room for interrogation, while the rest waited outside, the cold biting into their flesh as the uncertainty gnawed at their nerves.

On the ground, the tension among the villagers grew. The silence had broken, replaced by hushed whispers as people speculated about the fate of the boys. The atmosphere was thick with apprehension, each moment stretching like an eternity as the community anxiously awaited the next development in this harrowing morning.

After some time, three Maruti Gypsies drove into the ground. Everyone in the crowd was asked to line up and face the vehicles, where a masked informer sat inside each one, ready to identify suspected militants. The identification parades lasted for over an hour, but none of the informers could positively identify anyone. A collective sigh of relief swept through the crowd, as each person silently thanked their stars for not being falsely accused.

Now there was a bit of relaxation in the ground. People began talking to each other, some even venturing to one side of the ground to relieve themselves. Six elder villagers were selected by the army to accompany different search teams for door-to-door

inspections. Each team, accompanied by a civilian, began combing through every home, ensuring no one was hiding within.

Mushtaq, who had been sitting in the crackdown, was permitted to open his small shop. Villagers lined up to buy biscuits and cigarettes, a brief respite from the tension, as they stood in clusters, eating and smoking in the chilly open ground.

The search operation continued in the village, with soldiers methodically entering homes, looking for any signs of hidden militants. Meanwhile, in the commandeered house, the army was interrogating the selected boys, probing them for any clues about the militants' whereabouts.

The once-ordinary day had spiralled into an ordeal of fear and uncertainty. Each moment dragged on, the entire village held captive in a tense standoff between hope and despair. The soldiers moved with the precision of a well-oiled machine, their presence oppressive and unyielding. The villagers could do little but pray that the storm would soon pass, leaving their homes and loved ones unscathed.

Dusk crept in over the small village, the light ebbed, casting elongated shadows over the houses and cobblestone paths. But for Shahid, the day had grown ominously dark, not just because of the fading light. He found himself waiting outside the interrogation room, anxiety weaving tight knots in their stomachs. Shahid was the last in line to face the unknown, straining to hear even the faintest sound from within. Beside him, Shafi waited too, both ensnared in the same web of dread.

Soon Shafi was directed to enter the interrogation room. The door swung shut behind him, sealing away the world outside. Almost immediately, his terrified screams pierced the air—a raw, desperate plea for mercy. "Please, let me go! I've done nothing wrong!" His voice, drenched in dread, echoed ominously in the narrow corridor, sending shivers rippling down Shahid's spine. Every shrill cry from Shafi seemed to tighten the grip of fear

around him. The pain in his chest deepened, and he instinctively recited Quranic verses, fervently praying for protection, wrapping himself in a shroud of faith against the impending darkness of the interrogation.

Time dragged on like a cruel punishment, each passing minute stretching painfully. Shafi's screams ebbed and flowed, punctuated by moments of agonized silence that hinted at the nature of his torment. It felt like an eternity before the door finally creaked open, and Shafi emerged, dishevelled, his eyes wide with unspeakable horror. He stumbled out, gasping for breath, clearly shaken, but he was alive. He had endured the ordeal, albeit bruised and battered, both physically and emotionally.

Summoning what courage he could, Shahid stepped into the interrogation room, bracing himself for the worst. The atmosphere inside was suffocating, thick with the smell of sweat and fear. His heart pounded like a war drum in his chest, and his eyes widened at the sight before him. Two damp, tattered blankets lay on the floor, sinisterly crumpled. Next to them sat two large batteries, their aluminium heads connected by yellow wires, and a stout soldier stood menacingly with a thick bamboo stick in hand, a grim smile playing on his lips.

"Undress," the soldier ordered, his voice low and commanding, devoid of any compassion.

Panic surged through Shahid. "Sir, please, I'm just a college student! I'm in my first year of BSc," he stammered, desperately retrieving his college ID from his pocket, hoping to inject reason into the madness—hoping that the soldier would see his innocence.

The soldier looked at the ID with disinterest, waving it off. "We know you are not a militant. Just undress," he repeated, unfazed by Shahid's protestations.

Shahid's mind raced. "I'm not involved with any militant!" he pleaded, his voice rising in pitch. The soldier's insistent demands fell like cold rain on his spirit.

As he continued to resist, the tense confrontation escalated. Another soldier, lurking by the door, flanked him with menacing intent, stepping forward to grasp Shahid's arms. The physicality of it sent his heart racing, cascading adrenaline throughout his body. Just as the first soldier attempted to peel his pants away, a commander burst into the room, his arrival a sudden whirlwind that swept the tension away.

"Leave him. We're done here," the commander barked, and the soldiers' grip faltered. Shahid was released, the threat dissipating like vapor in the air, leaving him shaken but physically unscathed. He couldn't help but feel a mixture of relief and guilt; he had narrowly escaped a fate too dark to contemplate.

Needing to breathe life back into his fragile spirit, Shahid stepped outside as the army wound down their operations, hastily packing equipment into trucks before roaring away from the village. The twilight was peppered with shouts of jubilation from the villagers, a stark contrast to the tension that had hung like a cloud. "Nobody was taken!" they rejoiced, gathered in clusters, their relief palpable.

Aqib, Shahid's younger brother, rushed to him, worry mingled with elation. "Did they hurt you?" he asked, scanning Shahid's features for any sign of mistreatment. Shahid, feeling the warmth of familial love wrap around him, shook his head firmly. "No, I'm fine. I wasn't hurt at all," he confirmed, thoughts racing back to Shafi and the torment he had endured.

As villagers began to gather around Shafi's home to offer support, whispers of his harrowing experience began to spread. It became clear that Shafi had not only faced psychological torment but had been subjected to physical violence—drenched in wounds from the bamboo stick and shaken by the jolt of electric shocks.

His neighbours had rushed to carry him to the hospital, a visceral reminder of the shadows that lingered too close for comfort.

With a heavy heart, Shahid made his way back home as the sky deepened to indigo. Inside the warmth of his modest house, he found his mother, Sameena, weeping quietly, every tear wrought from the fear that had wrapped tightly around her heart upon hearing of the interrogation. The moment she saw him, her eyes lit up, but the worry still danced in her gaze. She engulfed him in a tight embrace, her body trembling as she clung to him, the tangible relief echoing in the quiet kitchen.

"Thank God, you are home!" she whispered, her voice muffled against his shoulder.

With his family surrounding him, Shahid sat down in the kitchen, their small sanctuary buzzing with the remnants of the day's threats. As his father and brother also entered the room, Shahid began recounting the harrowing details of his experience. Each word was heavy with the weight of survival, crafting a vivid tapestry of fear, vulnerability, and an unwavering bond of family, a testament to facing the shadows of oppression that could have consumed them.

As they listened, the flickering kitchen light cast warm shadows on their faces, a stark contrast to the chilling reality outside. There, the village lay quiet under a blanket of stars that shimmered above, a reminder of how fragile peace can be. And in the heart of an ordinary winter evening, amidst the lingering fear of what had transpired, the bond of love and resilience anchored them together, unwavering against the night.



BBC: A Storyteller



Aslam Sheikh was an old man with a large, white beard and a bald head. He was a great story teller. His constant references to BBC in his storytelling had earned him a unique nickname - "BBC" - among the local community. The elders in the area would jokingly address him as BBC, perceiving him as a humorous, light-hearted man. However, the teenagers in the neighbourhood cherished his company, as he had a remarkable ability to bridge the age gap between himself and the younger generation.

Aslam Sheikh, a charismatic figure, could be found surrounded by a sizable gathering of teenagers almost every day. These young individuals were drawn to him like moths to a flame, eagerly awaiting his spellbinding storytelling sessions. Aslam had a unique gift - he would regale his audience with the latest news he had heard the previous evening on BBC Sairbeen, the popular Urdu-language news program.

The teenagers who gathered around him were particularly interested in the latest political developments, as the region of Kashmir had recently witnessed a resurgence of armed struggle, and they were eager to understand the global perspective on the unfolding situation.

With his exceptional oratory skills and a flair for the dramatic, Aslam would weave the news into an engaging and mesmerizing narrative. He had a way of bringing current events to life, painting vivid pictures with his words and captivating his

young listeners. Whether it was a political development, a social issue, or a global happening, Aslam possessed the ability to transform the news into a riveting performance that left his audience enthralled.

His animated expressions and emphatic gestures added an extra layer of excitement and drama to the proceedings. The teenagers, their attention rapt, would listen intently as Aslam skilfully wove the news into a captivating tale. His storytelling prowess was such that he could transport his youthful audience to the heart of the events he described, making them feel as if they were witnessing the news unfold before their very eyes.

As Aslam regaled his audience with the news, he would skilfully navigate the complexities of the events, offering his own insights and interpretations. His ability to captivate his listeners was truly remarkable, and the teenagers who gathered around him day after day were drawn not only to the news itself but also to the sheer artistry of Aslam's storytelling.

It was not uncommon to see Aslam surrounded by a group of eager teenagers, their eyes wide with wonder as they listened intently to his stories. The teenagers would often spend the entire day in his company, reluctant to leave even as the sun dipped below the horizon. As the sun set and the shadows lengthened, Aslam's audience would hang on to his every word, captivated by the way he brought the news to life, weaving together facts, anecdotes, and his own unique brand of commentary. In these moments, the teenagers were not merely passive recipients of information; they were active participants in a shared experience.

Aslam Sheikh's life had once been filled with warmth and connection, but it was soon marked by a series of heartbreaking events. He shared a deep bond with his beloved younger brother, whose sudden and untimely death left Aslam feeling profoundly isolated and shattered.

Not long after, he faced another devastating loss when his wife passed away after a prolonged illness, leaving him to raise their two young sons alone. Despite his grief, Aslam poured all his love and energy into caring for his children, determined to provide them with stability and support. His resilience became the foundation for their well-being, as he devoted himself to their upbringing with unwavering dedication.

As his sons grew up and eventually moved abroad after getting married, Aslam found himself alone once more. With his immediate family no longer by his side, he turned to the company of local boys, who were willing to spend time with him and provide him the companionship he craved.

Aslam's narratives were not merely tales spun for entertainment, but woven with a deep understanding of the human experience. When he spoke, his words seemed to resonate within the hearts and minds of his audience, stirring emotions and sparking thoughtful discussions.

On some occasions, Aslam would invite the local boys to his modest but cozy home, where these lively discussions would continue long into the evening. It was during these visits that the bonds between Aslam and the young boys grew stronger, as he shared not only his stories but also glimpses into his own life and experiences.

One such day, Aslam invited the boys to his home, eager to share his achievements and introduce them to his family members through a series of photographs. As he flipped through the album, his expression suddenly changed when he came across a picture of his late brother. Aslam's eyes became moist, and a palpable sense of sorrow crossed his features.

Sensing Aslam's grief, one of the boys, a perceptive young lad named Gulzar, reached out and placed a comforting hand on the old man's shoulder. With a compassionate smile, Gulzar said, "That's life." His simple yet profound words seemed to strike a

chord within Aslam, who then looked at the boy and recited the following verse:

"No longer mourn for me when I am dead,
Then you shall hear the surly, sullen bell
Give warning to the world that I am fled
From this vile world, with vilest worms to dwell."

The recitation of the poem was accompanied by a sudden shift in Aslam's demeanour, as the sorrow that had briefly clouded his features gave way to a warm, inviting smile. He pulled the boy closer and said, "Come, let's have lunch together."

The boys, though initially hesitant, found themselves unable to resist Aslam's infectious enthusiasm. One by one, they began to enthusiastically participate in the preparations for the meal. Gulzar was dispatched to the nearby market to purchase a kilo of mutton, while the other boys set to work peeling potatoes and assisting Aslam in cooking the aromatic rice.

As the delectable scents of the simmering mutton and the fragrant rice wafted through the air, the boys were struck by a sense of camaraderie and belonging. They worked together seamlessly, each contributing their own unique skills and energy to the task at hand. In that moment, Aslam's home had become a hub of vibrant activity, a place where the boundaries between storyteller and audience had blurred, and a shared experience of fellowship and joy united them all.

As they sat together on the dastarkhwan and relished the delectable meal, Aslam felt a profound sense of belonging and contentment. For this man who lived alone, the company of these young boys meant the world to him. They had engaged in lively discussions on a variety of topics, and the time they had spent together had been a cherished moment in Aslam's life.

However, the joyous occasion was suddenly interrupted when the father of one of the boys, Shafiq, arrived and scolded Aslam harshly, using abusive language towards him. This sudden display of disrespect threatened to shatter the warm and nurturing atmosphere that Aslam had so carefully cultivated. Shafiq's father insulted Aslam, calling him a "joker" and accusing him of wasting the boys' time when they should be focusing on their studies.

Aslam listened to the tirade in stoic silence, his expression betraying neither anger nor resentment. The boys, too, remained quiet, visibly uncomfortable with the situation. Shafiq and his father then left, so left all the boys, leaving Aslam alone in his home, a little saddened by the unpleasant encounter.

For the next few days, Aslam withdrew from his usual routine, choosing to stay in the solitude of his home. He spent hours in quiet reflection, reminiscing about his life and the journey that had brought him to this point. The sting of the harsh words still lingered, but Aslam's resilience and unwavering spirit eventually began to surface once more.

One day, Aslam heard a knock on his door, and when he opened it, he was greeted by the smiling faces of the boys he had come to cherish. Without a word, they embraced him warmly, and Aslam felt his heart swell with joy. The boys then requested that he resume his storytelling sessions, eager to hear his latest news and anecdotes.

Aslam's smile widened, and he welcomed the boys into his home, the warmth and camaraderie of their shared experiences once again filling the air. As they gathered around the living room, Aslam began to weave his captivating tales, his words resonating with the same power and eloquence that had first drawn the boys to his doorstep. In that moment, the temporary sting of the earlier encounter faded, replaced by the enduring bonds of friendship and the joy of shared stories.



An Old Man



On a sunny summer day, the air around Dal Lake carried the nostalgia of countless memories. A portly elderly man, adorned in a comfortably checkered half-sleeve shirt with gallus, expertly parked his vibrant red vehicle near the inviting wooden deck that extended gracefully over the edge of famous Dal Lake. With a seasoned grace, he stepped out, a stick in hand, accompanied by his grandson, who mirrored his every move.

Together, they strolled towards the deck, where the old man gently placed his grandson on a weathered wooden bench. Beside the child, he carefully positioned his trusty stick, bejewelled with a brass horse head. The scene, set against the backdrop of the shimmering lake, hinted at a timeless connection between generations.

On the roadside, a tempting aroma wafted from a lively barbeque stall, capturing the old man's attention. The stall owner, sensing a familiar face, hurried over to greet him. With a warm exchange of words, the old man ordered two barbeques, settling in on the other side of the bench.

As the sizzling skewers danced over the open flame, the old man turned to his grandson, a little one of about five or six years, and inquired with a tender smile, "Are you comfortably seated, my dear?" The question, laden with love and the promise of shared moments, echoed against the serene canvas of the lake.

The young boy looked up at his grandfather, his eyes full of excitement and wonder. "Yes, Grandpa," he replied with a

smile, his small legs swinging back and forth on the bench. The old man nodded, satisfied with his response, and turned his attention to the approaching barbeque stall owner.

The stall owner, busying himself with preparing the barbeque, asked him, "Mr. Latif, it's been too long! How have you been?" Latif smiled back, "I've been well, thank you. Just thought I'd bring my grandson here to enjoy the beautiful day by the lake."

Ibrahim nodded approvingly, flipping the skewers expertly on the grill. His stall was known for its succulent aroma and delicious flavours, attracting both locals and tourists alike. "A wise choice, Mr. Latif. There's nothing quite like the tranquility of Dal Lake. Your grandson seems to be enjoying himself already!" he observed, glancing towards the delighted young boy.

As the tantalizing scent of barbeque filled the air, his grandson tugged at Mr. Latif's sleeve, unable to contain his curiosity any longer. "Grandpa, can I have a barbeque too?" he asked, his eyes wide with anticipation. Mr. Latif chuckled, patting the boy's head affectionately. "Of course, my dear. Ibrahim Uncle is also making one for you."

Ibrahim's smile widened, delighted to see the bond between grandfather and grandson. The old man placed one in front of his grandson and the other in his own hand, causing the boy's face to light up with joy. "Eat slowly, my dear. We have all day to enjoy our meal," Mr. Latif reminded his grandson, his voice filled with love.

As Latif savoured the flavours of the barbecue, his gaze was drawn towards a grandiose swimming boat, where exuberant young boys leapt into the refreshing embrace of the lake. Memories of his school days flooded back, transporting him to the moments when he and his friends would explore Dal Lake, embarking on joyous adventures through its crystalline waters. Back then, the lake was a testament to purity, allowing them to witness the lakebed's clarity as they swam across its expanse.

Latif reminisced about the camaraderie shared with his friends, particularly recalling Vijay Dhar, a remarkable swimmer whose prowess was matched only by his audacity. Vijay's dives were a spectacle; he plunged into the lake with such skill that he would resurface with a handful of mud, triumphantly retrieved from the depths below. Those carefree days by Dal Lake were etched in Latif's memory, a cherished chapter of youthful escapades and unbridled exploration.

Latif could vividly recall the joy and excitement that filled their hearts as they swam through the cool waters of the lake. Each stroke brought them closer to their destination, and with every breath, they felt a sense of liberation and serenity. The lake was their playground, a place where they could escape the worries of the world and indulge in pure bliss.

Their swimming expeditions were not only a source of joy but also an opportunity for friendship to blossom. As they swam side by side, their laughter echoed through the tranquil surroundings. They would challenge each other to swim faster or dive deeper, pushing the boundaries of their abilities. The camaraderie amongst the group was unbreakable, and each day at the lake created everlasting memories.

But as Latif returned to the present, reality set in. He looked around the crowded shores of the lake, filled with tourist boats and bustling activity. The once translucent waters had become clouded with pollution, and the untouched beauty of his cherished memories seemed like a distant dream.

Latif found himself reminiscing about the days of his youth, a time when he indulged in the exhilarating activity of water skiing on Dal Lake. Transporting himself back in time, he could vividly recall navigating the tranquil waters on a boat, making his way to Char Chinar, where his aquatic adventures would begin. From this starting point, he skilfully manoeuvred through the ripples, gracefully water skiing to Nehru Park.

In those days, Latif possessed a slender physique, and his proficiency in aerobics seamlessly complemented his water-skiing prowess. The synchronization of athleticism and agility created a symphony of movements, making each session on the lake a delightful experience. The memories of those carefree moments lingered, a testament to the joy he derived from the combination of skill, youth, and the enchanting waters of Dal Lake.

He remembered the thrill of conquering each new wave, jumping off ramps, and executing daring flips in mid-air. His heart would race with anticipation each time he geared up for a new trick, pushing himself to test the limits of his abilities. There was an indescribable joy in defying gravity, feeling weightless and untethered as he soared through the air, defying the confines of earthly limitations.

On weekends, Dal Lake would transform into a bustling hub of activity, with locals and tourists alike flocking to the water's edge to witness the exhilarating spectacle of water skiing. They would cheer and applaud as Latif and his companions displayed their skills, their faces lit up with awe and admiration. It was a moment of pure connection as Latif felt an unspoken bond with the crowd, his heart swelling with pride and a sense of achievement.

And so, as Latif found himself lost in the melodies of nostalgia, he couldn't help but yearn for those days, to feel the rush of adrenaline and the freedom of the open water once again. But even if his skiing days were over, he knew that the memories and experiences he had accumulated would forever be etched in his mind, a treasure trove of moments that would keep him connected to his youthful spirit and the enchanting waters of Dal Lake.

Latif felt a pang of nostalgia mixed with a hint of sadness. The lake that once held such purity and tranquility had become a victim of progress and modernization. But amidst the changes,

Latif remained grateful for the memories he had made during his youth days.

After savouring the delectable barbeque, Latif placed the skewer on the plate, noticing that his grandson was still relishing the flavours. Taking thoughtful consideration, Latif meticulously cut the barbeque pieces into smaller, more manageable portions for his grandson. With an assortment of three enticing chutneys available, his grandson indulged in the joy of dipping each small piece before savouring the delightful medley.

Not content with just one round, Latif decided to order another serving for himself. Swiftly responding to his request, Ibrahim promptly presented him with a fresh plate adorned with three distinct chutneys. Latif carefully selected a piece, immersing himself once again in the culinary delight.

As Latif enjoyed the barbeque, his gaze shifted to the picturesque scene on the dal lake, where numerous Shikaras gracefully glided across the water. The lake held a reputation as a romantic destination, with young couples often opting for Shikara rides as a charming date activity. Lost in the present, Latif's thoughts meandered back to the days of his first love during his college years.

Enrolled at SP College, Latif found himself captivated by the ethereal beauty of Tabassum, a student at Women's College M.A Road. With her tall and slender frame, combined with her radiant fair complexion, she was a vision that could halt time itself. But what truly mesmerized Latif was her long, lustrous hair, elegantly braided down her back.

Tabassum possessed an air of grace and sophistication that set her apart from her peers. With each step she took, she exuded an aura of confidence and poise, drawing the attention and admiration of everyone around her. Her long hair, the colour of midnight, cascaded down her back like a waterfall of silk, adding to her magnetic allure.

Latif couldn't help but be drawn to Tabassum's enchanting presence. He found himself daydreaming about catching a glimpse of her, hoping to steal a momentary glance at her captivating beauty. Her hair, meticulously braided, seemed to hold within it a touch of mystery as if it whispered secrets only known to her. Persistent in his pursuit, Latif followed her for days until he crossed paths with Nuzhat, Tabassum's best friend. Desiring a meeting, Latif implored Nuzhat to convey his message to Tabassum, leading to numerous rejections.

After persistent efforts, Nuzhat devised a plan, suggesting that they rendezvous at Shakti Sweets. Latif, eager to seize the opportunity, discreetly followed them into the sweet shop. Seated adjacent to them, Latif greeted Nuzhat, breaking the ice with an offer to order for both of them.

However, Tabassum remained silent, leaving Nuzhat to assert their independence, "No, we shall order on our own." Unfazed, Latif, with a hint of confidence, declared, "I've already ordered Rasmalai for you as well," setting the stage for a potentially sweet beginning.

Latif offered, sensing the vibes between him and Tabassum.

Nuzhat looked surprised but smiled shyly, "Thank you, but you really didn't have to."

Latif chuckled, "Well, I just wanted to treat the two beautiful ladies sitting next to me. It's a gesture of goodwill."

Tabassum, still sceptical, replied, "We can pay for our own sweets."

Undeterred, Latif insisted, "Please, it would be my pleasure. Besides, I would love the chance to get to know you both better."

Nuzhat finally nodded and said softly, "Alright, thank you. We appreciate it."

As they waited for their order, Latif engaged them in conversation, learning more about Tabassum's interests and dreams. Despite the initial awkwardness, a friendly rapport began to form as they discovered shared interests.

Their Rasmalai arrived, and with each bite, a sense of comfort enveloped the trio. Latif's generosity had broken down the walls between them, setting the stage for a blossoming friendship.

Over the next few weeks, Latif and Tabassum started spending more time together. They would meet at various cafes, take walks along the beautiful Dal Lake, and share their hopes and aspirations. As their friendship deepened, their conversations became increasingly personal, and they realized they had developed feelings for each other. Their affinity for each other blossomed as they continued to share their hopes, dreams, and life aspirations.

As their bond deepened, it was during one of their outings that Latif decided to take Tabassum for a Shikara Ride on Dal Lake. As they sat in the beautifully decorated boat, gliding across the calm waters, Latif's courage swelled within him. Unable to contain his emotions any longer, he gently pulled Tabassum close and planted a soft kiss on her lips.

To his surprise, she turned her face to the side but smiled warmly at him. In her eyes, he saw the reflection of his own feelings reciprocated. Their connection grew stronger as they continued the shikara ride, creating lasting memories that would forever be etched in their hearts.

As they sailed towards Char Chinar, a picturesque island on Dal Lake, they decided to have lunch at a boat restaurant. Surrounded by the tranquility of the lake, they savoured delicious cuisine and enjoyed each other's company. On their journey back, a young girl in a small shikara offered them a beautiful lotus flower as a symbol of love and purity. Latif graciously accepted

the gift, his heart filled with affection for Tabassum. With a gentle smile, he handed her the lotus, a token of his deepest affection.

From that moment on, Latif and Tabassum's love story bloomed into something truly extraordinary. They would frequently visit Dal Lake, reliving the joy of their first shikara ride and creating new memories that would forever be cherished. The lake became a sanctuary where their love could thrive, surrounded by breathtaking beauty and echoing with the laughter and whispers of their shared dreams.

Now, as Latif sat by the lake, a gentle breeze rustling through the Chinar tree, he found himself entranced by the memories of those beautiful days. Nostalgia washed over him, filling his heart with a bittersweet longing. Although time had passed and circumstances had changed, the love he once shared with Tabassum remained an indelible part of his story. It reminded him of the power of a chance encounter and the timeless beauty of love that endures despite the test of time.

Latif finally stood up, a contented smile gracing his lips. He felt a warm sense of gratitude for the love he once held and for the memories that had shaped him into the person he was today. Paying Ibrahim for the delicious barbeques, Latif clasped the hands of his grandson, leading him away from the lakeside. With a contented sigh, Mr. Latif settled into the driver's seat, his grandson sitting beside him.

As they drove, Latif's mind drifted to thoughts of Tabassum, wondering about her whereabouts and the course her life had taken. The wistful pondering echoed the bittersweet symphony of a love story that had stood the test of time, leaving an indelible mark on Latif's heart.

In the cocoon of his reflections, Latif found himself yearning for a serendipitous meet, a fleeting moment where the threads of their lives might intertwine once more. The wish to encounter Tabassum anew lingered like a gentle whisper, an

unspoken desire echoing in the recesses of his soul. The road ahead seemed to stretch infinitely, carrying with it the weight of untold possibilities.

With each passing mile, Latif's yearning deepened, resonating with the quiet longing that accompanies the recollection of cherished memories. The road became a metaphorical bridge between the past and the present, a conduit for emotions that traversed the spectrum of joy and melancholy. The indelible mark of their love story remained imprinted on his consciousness, a testament to the enduring power of a connection that time had failed to erase.

As the engine hummed and the landscape unfolded, Latif couldn't help but envision the script of their lives diverging and converging like a dance of fate. The road, much like the narrative of their intertwined hearts, held twists and turns, unknown horizons awaiting exploration. In the cocoon of his car, Latif carried not just the physical weight of the journey but also the emotional baggage of unfulfilled dreams and the yearning for a reunion that lingered like a cherished melody.



Eleven Daughters



Sheikh Ghulam Ahmad was a man of strict principles and unwavering discipline, traits he deeply valued and instilled in every member of his family. His household was a paragon of order and respect, consisting of his devoted wife and two sons, both of whom embodied the same discipline and respect for tradition that he had meticulously nurtured. His elder son, Sheikh Gh Mohi-uddin, was a man of intellect and responsibility, serving as the director of Animal Husbandry, while his younger son, Sheikh Abdul Rashid, worked in the Forest Department, contributing to the preservation and care of the natural world.

The family, though engaged in different spheres of life, shared a bond of love and mutual respect, creating a harmonious and joyous home. Their lives were well-organized, and their unity was a testament to the values Sheikh Ghulam Ahmad had instilled in them. His two sons carried forward his legacy, maintaining a strong connection to the family's core principles.

When the time came for both of his sons to marry, Sheikh Ghulam Ahmad was faced with a significant decision. By chance, he received marriage proposals for his sons from two sisters. Recognizing an opportunity to solidify the closeness between his sons and ensure the unity of his family for generations to come, Sheikh Ghulam Ahmad saw the match as a strategic and wise choice. With great foresight, he decided to marry his sons to these two sisters, believing that it would not only maintain the bond between his sons but also create an even stronger, more unified family.

Sheikh Ghulam Ahmad's foresight and wisdom in this decision underscored his deep understanding of family dynamics. He knew that such a union would not only maintain the bond between his sons but also create a close-knit family that would stand together through life's challenges. His vision for a unified family, deeply rooted in discipline and mutual respect, was realized as his sons embraced this path, carrying forward the legacy of their father.

Life progressed smoothly in Sheikh Ghulam Ahmad's household. Before his passing, he gathered his sons and imparted his final words of wisdom. He urged them to always support one another, to remain united, and to be each other's pillars of strength. His sons, deeply moved by his counsel, vowed to uphold his advice in both word and spirit.

With time, the household blossomed with the arrival of children. Sheikh Ghulam Mohi-u-din was blessed with four daughters, while Sheikh Abdul Rashid had seven daughters. The house now echoed with the joyful noises and playful mischief of children. The family's happiness knew no bounds, thriving in the vibrant life Sheikh Ghulam Ahmad had envisioned. Both brothers lived together in peace, their homes seamlessly merging into one warm, unified household.

However, life's unforeseen tragedies soon cast a shadow over their joy. Sheikh Ghulam Mohi-u-din, who had always been a pillar of strength and guidance, suddenly fell ill. His condition deteriorated rapidly in ways that baffled the doctors. Within a week, the illness claimed his life, leaving the family in shock and sorrow. Sheikh Abdul Rashid, who was away on duty, rushed home upon hearing the devastating news.

As he entered the room where his brother's body lay, surrounded by mourning women, the reality of the loss overwhelmed him. He collapsed in anguish onto his brother's body, engulfed in bitter tears, each sob resonating with a profound

sense of grief that seemed to crush his spirit. A mountain of sorrow had descended upon him, shattering the peace that had once defined their lives.

Despite the profound loss, Sheikh Abdul Rashid clung to his father's teachings. He resolved to honour his brother's memory by upholding the unity and love that Sheikh Ghulam Ahmad had so carefully nurtured, ensuring that the legacy of discipline, respect, and familial support would endure through the generations.

Now, Sheikh Abdul Rashid found himself as the sole male figure among thirteen females—his devoted wife, his brother's widow, and the eleven daughters, all of whom looked to him for strength and guidance. The road ahead felt dark and uncertain, fraught with challenges and bound by the heavy shackles of responsibility. An avalanche of obligations settled upon his shoulders, but he was resolute. He made the monumental decision to embrace his brother's family, merging their lives in a collective struggle to forge a future despite the prevailing shadows.

With unwavering commitment, Sheikh Abdul Rashid assumed the role of a guardian, tasked with not only feeding this vast and intricate family but also ensuring that each daughter received the best possible education. He understood that the safety and well-being of the eleven young girls rested firmly upon his shoulders. Driven by a profound sense of duty and love, he became a vigilant protector, a steadfast watchdog ensuring that they stayed grounded, steering clear of any perilous paths that could lead them astray. Every decision he made was infused with a fervent desire to shield them from the hardships of the world while instilling in them the virtues of respect, hard work, and integrity.

Through the heart-wrenching sorrow, Sheikh Abdul Rashid blossomed into a pillar of strength for his family. The household, though still touched by grief, began to adapt to a new rhythm—one that embraced both their shared loss and the vibrant

spirit of the children. In their laughter, he found a wellspring of motivation to persevere. He learned to appreciate the small moments of joy, allowing them to nourish his weary soul as he navigated the complexities of his new life.

The journey ahead appeared murky and steep, with the weight of responsibility pressing heavily upon him. Yet, with the dawn of a new purpose kindling within his heart, Abdul Rashid made a courageous decision. He relinquished his stable job and opened a modest provision store close to home, ensuring he could keep a watchful eye over his eleven daughters. Every day spent in that little corner shop became a testament to his love and dedication; every purchase he made and every sale he completed was driven by a profound desire to protect and provide for the girls he had embraced as his own.

Through the heart-wrenching sorrow that had settled over the household, Abdul Rashid began to blossom into an unyielding pillar of strength. The laughter of his daughters, tinged with both innocence and the spirit of resilience, became the melody that guided him through his grief. He found solace in their shared moments, learning to appreciate the simple joys of life—a whispered secret between sisters, a shared meal, or an impromptu dance that could momentarily lift the weight of sadness from their shoulders.

Under his watchful gaze, the daughters began to flourish, their spirits taking flight in a supportive environment that Abdul Rashid cultivated with love. He poured his heart into ensuring they received the education they deserved, aware that empowering them with knowledge was the greatest gift he could provide. The flames of their dreams grew brighter, fed by his encouragement and the steadfast belief that they could rise above their circumstances, reaching for the stars that once seemed so far beyond their grasp.

As time went by, his daughters grew into vibrant young women. The second daughter, Shireen, secured a job at a bank, becoming an anchor of support for Abdul Rashid in his struggles. In their family discussions, the topic of marriage began to emerge, and despite their modest means, Sheikh Abdul Rashid faced the prospect of marrying off his daughters with unwavering courage and an open heart. Shireen made a selfless decision: she would not marry until all her sisters had found their partners. Her resolve was a testament to her love for her uncle and her commitment to supporting him.

One by one, he entrusted them to new homes, navigating the complexities of fortunes and futures linked to their marriages with a heart filled with hope—a hope that never wavered, despite the challenges that loomed darkly overhead.

Years passed, and the passage of time-weathered his body, yet inside, the fire of resilience and love remained unquenched. Now an old man, his hair flecked with silver, Sheikh Abdul Rashid stepped outside, the weight of his journey etched into the lines of his face. He felt a profound sense of satisfaction, a quiet contentment borne from a lifetime of love, sacrifice, and an unwavering commitment to family. As he slowly walked toward the mosque to offer his prayers, he carried with him the echoes of his brother's laughter, the ambitious dreams of his daughters, and the quiet strength forged in the crucible of sorrow, forever grateful for the life he had built amidst the tempests that had sought to claim him. At that moment, under the vast expanse of the sky, he realized that love, unwavering and relentless, will always find a way to bloom, illuminating even the darkest of paths.



Grandpa



Ghulam Mohammad had settled into a life of quiet monotony after years of dedicated service in his job, which he had recently put behind him in retirement. His days were characterized by an unremarkable routine that seemed to blend seamlessly into one another, devoid of excitement and filled with a persistent sense of ennui. Living in a modest, cozy home with his wife, Syeda, their only son, Javeed, and Javeed's wife, Noor, Ghulam Mohammad found himself increasingly isolated in a world bustling with activity and obligations that the younger generation seemed enthralled by.

Javeed, now a steadfast employee in his company, frequently returned home late, often weary and drained from the demands of his professional life. His focus lay on his work, leaving little room for familial interactions. Noor, with her own career commitments, followed a similarly rigorous schedule, spending most of her evenings in the kitchen, preparing meals, and attending to the household chores. Their lives, although intertwined, often left Ghulam Mohammad in solitude, trapped in the silence of the house while life raced on outside.

As the sun rose and set each day, he would occupy his favourite resting corner, a modest recliner in the family room, where the walls held memories captured in fading photographs. This spot became his retreat, a place where he could observe, yet feel somewhat detached from the lives unfolding around him. His daily errands typically involved short trips to the market to purchase vegetables, where he would engage in brief

conversations with vendors but return home feeling the weight of his solitude. In the evenings, Ghulam Mohammad would turn on the television, tuning in to the day's news, fleetingly connected to the outside world, but quickly succumbed again to the stillness that enveloped his life. The monotony was palpable; he went to bed each night with a longing for something—anything—to disrupt the repetitive rhythm of his existence.

On a sunlit afternoon, a momentous revelation changed the course of their family life forever: Noor was pregnant. This news heralded a profound transformation that none of them could have foreseen. After three years of marriage, Javeed and Noor joyfully welcomed their first child—a son they named Fawad. The arrival of the newborn swept through the house like a rejuvenating breeze, inhaling fresh life into Ghulam Mohammad's spirit and rekindling the warmth of joy that had long been dormant.

Suddenly, the home that had been filled with silence transformed into a spirited hive of activity and laughter. They would gather in the evenings, no longer isolated in their individual routines but united as a family in laughter and love. Fawad became the centre of attention, a cherished bundle that brought everyone together for a shared purpose. Each family member began to devote their time to caring for and nurturing the little one. The once-dull evenings were now animated with the soft coos of the baby and the excited chatter of family members discussing everything from diaper duties to the best baby foods.

Ghulam Mohammad found himself drawn into this lively atmosphere, experiencing a resurgence of vitality he thought was lost forever. He would spend hours cradling Fawad in his arms, his heart swelling with pride and love as he watched the tiny infant curl his fingers around his grandpa's weathered hand. This small act ignited in him a sense of connection to the universe and a rekindled purpose that he thought retirement had taken away.

Every moment with Fawad was a journey of discovery—his infectious giggles, curious glances, and the way he kicked his legs as if trying to leap into life itself. As days turned into weeks and weeks into months, Fawad's sixth birthday became a milestone, a celebration of growth for them both.

Ghulam Mohammad embraced his role as the storyteller, a title he carried with pride and joy. It became his mission to share the wisdom and experiences of his youth with this new generation. His stories, rich with lessons and laughter, bridged the gap between their worlds. He captivated Fawad with vivid tales of distant lands and heroic feats, weaving colourful narratives that ignited the child's imagination. Their shared moments were filled with laughter—whether through playful games of peek-a-boo or the magic of storytelling.

As the strong bond between grandfather and grandson flourished, the dynamic of their relationship naturally evolved. Fawad began to prefer snuggling with Ghulam Mohammad at bedtime instead of seeking the comfort of his parents. There was a unique tranquility that enveloped them during those quiet night moments—an unspoken understanding, a connection that transcended words. Ghulam Mohammad found solace in this choice, as he had long bid farewell to the dreariness that characterized much of his previous life. The arrival of Fawad had ignited a spark of vitality within him, illuminating the corners of his world with joy and cherished chaos that only a child could bring.

In their intimate exchanges, Ghulam Mohammad often found himself recounting tales of his own childhood—stories rich with nostalgia, adventure, and wisdom. Each narrative he shared seemed to transport them both to a world where time stood still, a world painted with the vibrant hues of innocence and mischief that only childhood could offer. Fawad listened with rapt attention, his wide eyes filled with wonder, perfectly embodying the eager student seeking to connect with the life experiences of his

forebear. Ghulam Mohammad could almost see his grandson stitching together the fabric of his identity through these narratives; it was as though Fawad was absorbing not only the playful stories of mischief and adventure but also the invaluable lessons tucked away within them.

In each moment, Ghulam Mohammad realized the profound beauty of this chapter in his life—a time to reflect, bond, and revel in the joy of shared experiences. As Fawad grew and flourished, he was nurturing the roots of respect, love, and a legacy that would carry forward into a future full of promise. Together, they were not merely a grandpa and grandson; they were co-narrators in a marvellous story, spinning a yarn that would echo through generations.

With each passing day, the bond between Ghulam Mohammad and Fawad grew stronger, a connection deepening amid the ordinary moments of life. Their routines became intertwined; each morning, Ghulam Mohammad would help Fawad prepare for school, carefully packing his lunch and ensuring he was dressed just right. With a gentle hand on his shoulder, he would accompany him to the bus stand, bestowing words of encouragement as they walked. As they stood together, waiting for the bright yellow school bus to arrive, Ghulam Mohammad would share snippets of wisdom, anecdotes that would linger in Fawad's mind throughout the day.

In the afternoons, Ghulam Mohammad would stand by the roadside. As soon as the bus skidded to a halt and Fawad bounded off—his backpack bouncing behind him—Ghulam Mohammad's face would light up with a smile. He would take Fawad's bag, as they strolled home together, their laughter echoed through the lane, Fawad recounted stories of his day—tales of playful mischief, classroom victories, and the occasional scrape on the playground.

Evenings were their special time, a sacred part of the day reserved for the two of them. After a quick cup of tea and some rest, Ghulam Mohammad would take Fawad for a drive in his cherished old car. The car, though aged and a bit creaky, seemed almost magical to Fawad—its rattling engine a soundtrack to their shared adventures. They would cruise down familiar paths, the fading sunlight casting golden hues on the world around them. Each turn in the road felt like the start of a new journey, with laughter spilling out of the windows and into the soft evening air. These drives weren't just about the destinations—they were about the irreplaceable bond they shared, the stories they told, and the memories they created with each breathtaking sunset.

Fawad adored curling up beside his grandpa at night, eager to fall asleep to the soothing cadence of Ghulam Mohammad's voice recounting enchanting stories before drifting off into dreams. In those quiet moments, wrapped in the warmth of family, they became not just friends but inseparable companions, each finding joy and solace in the other's presence. Ghulam Mohammad realized that they had grown to be indispensable to one another, creating a bond that was as deep as it was wide, stretching beyond mere obligation and into the realms of love and companionship.

As time meandered onward like a quiet river, Fawad grew before Ghulam Mohammad's eyes, transforming from a curious little boy into a thoughtful teenager. Now in the 10th grade, Fawad had outgrown the cozy bed where he once snuggled next to his grandpa. He had moved to a different room, where the distant sounds of laughter and nighttime stories were replaced with the soft hum of solitude. Yet, the emotional distance was non-existent; their relationship had only deepened. Fawad still cherished the moments spent with his grandpa and continued to share every fleeting detail of his school life with Ghulam Mohammad. Whether it was recounting tales of his classmates' amusing antics or discussing the latest challenges he faced in his studies, they still

laughed together, the echoes of their shared joy resonating through the walls of their home.

With each passing day, Ghulam Mohammad became not just a storyteller but also a confidant, a steadfast anchor in Fawad's tumultuous teenage years. The bond they forged was a sanctuary, a place where Fawad could express his fears, dreams, and aspirations without hesitation. Ghulam Mohammad listened intently, his eyes sparkling with understanding. For Fawad, these conversations were a safety net, providing comfort in a world that sometimes felt overwhelming.

The long-awaited day finally arrived when Fawad completed his matriculation exams, marking a significant milestone in his life that was met with a swirl of emotions—excitement, relief, and an eager anticipation of what lay ahead. It wasn't just a day of personal triumph for him; it was also a moment of extraordinary joy for his grandpa, Ghulam Mohammad. The old man's happiness was palpable, radiating from him like sunshine breaking through a thick cloud cover after a storm. Ghulam Mohammad observed his grandson's transformation with immense pride, watching as the boy he had lovingly nurtured was blossoming into a young man poised to venture into the world.

To commemorate this momentous achievement, Ghulam Mohammad decided to host an extravagant wazwan party. Invitations were extended far and wide, gathering not just family but a tapestry of friends, neighbours, and acquaintances—all eager to share in the joy of Fawad's accomplishments. The air buzzed with laughter, warm greetings, and the mouth-watering aroma of exquisite dishes being prepared. Fawad felt enveloped by love and communal spirit, grateful for the support of his family and friends as he entered this new chapter of his life.

As time flew, Fawad transitioned into higher secondary education, a new realm filled with fresh challenges and the

excitement of meeting new friends. However, amid the whirlwind of studies and newfound responsibilities, his cherished bond with his grandfather remained a comforting constant in his life. Yet, as is often the case during the tumultuous teenage years, the frequency of their interactions diminished. Fawad found himself more engrossed in his studies and social life.

However, life took an unexpected and heartbreaking turn when Ghulam Mohammad fell ill, leading to his hospitalization. Fawad, although busy with his studies, made it a point to visit his grandpa regularly. Each visit cracked open a window to memories and affection, yet he couldn't shake the feeling of impending loss that lingered in the back of his mind. He watched helplessly as the vibrant man who had always been his guiding star grew frailer with each passing day.

One fateful afternoon, while buried in his textbooks, a heart-wrenching phone call shattered the calm of Fawad's room. The news of his grandfather's passing hit him like a bolt of lightning; it felt as though an immense mountain had suddenly fallen upon him, leaving him breathless and in utter disbelief. He quickly gathered his thoughts, his heart racing as he dashed to the hospital, each step feeling heavier than the last. His mind raced with memories—the laughter, the stories, the wisdom shared during countless conversations.

Upon arriving at the hospital, the stark reality of his grandfather's death began to sink in. His body was transported back home, where relatives and neighbours, shrouded in an air of solemnity, hurried to prepare for his last ablution. Each movement felt surreal to Fawad as he stood in despair, consumed by grief. His eyes filled with tears as he looked upon his grandpa—once a robust figure who had held his hand on the way to school—now lying lifeless, a mere shell of the man who had filled his childhood with joy and wisdom.

As Ghulam Mohammad's body was washed and prepared for burial, Fawad couldn't help but imagine the countless lessons, fables, and moments of kindness that now existed only in memory. The palpable pain of loss wrapped around Fawad like a suffocating blanket as he wept openly, his heart shattering with every realization that this beloved figure would no longer be by his side.

Finally, the time came to bid farewell. The funeral procession made its way to the graveyard, a slow march filled with muted whispers and solemn faces. Fawad walked behind his grandfather's casket, feeling as if he was moving through a fog, each step adding to his sorrow. At the gravesite, they laid Ghulam Mohammad to rest in a cold, quiet embrace of the earth, a final gift of peace after a life well lived.

Standing there, watching the last shovels of earth cover the man who had shaped so much of who he was, Fawad felt utterly broken. Memories flooded his mind—the tenderness of his grandfather's touch, the warmth of his laughter, the lessons imparted on nights spent talking beneath a blanket of stars. As the realization fully descended upon him like twilight, he recognized that he was left with a chasm in his heart, yet also a treasure trove of memories to help him navigate the world ahead.

With each passing day, as he returned home from school or revisited the places they used to share, the weight of his loss lingered. The warmth of those cherished memories became a source of both comfort and pain, fuelling his journey into manhood as he slowly began to understand the profound impact of love, loss, and the enduring legacy of family. Fawad knew that while his grandfather was gone, the wisdom, values, and unconditional love he received would guide him throughout his life, lighting the path he had yet to travel.



The Choice Between Heart and Mind



Baha was a remarkable young girl whose life was singularly devoted to the pursuit of academic excellence. Unlike her classmates, who were often drawn to the fleeting allures of teenage social circles and frivolous diversions, Baha's every waking moment was consumed by a relentless thirst for knowledge and a burning desire to shape her own destiny through the power of her intellect.

From a young age, Baha displayed an exceptional aptitude for learning, her sharp mind effortlessly absorbing and synthesizing information with a level of focus and dedication that left her classmates in awe. While others of her age were content to while away their hours in the company of friends, indulging in the latest fads and fashions, Baha remained steadfastly committed to her studies, her eyes ever-trained on the horizon of her academic ambitions.

This singular focus, however, did not diminish Baha's natural beauty. Indeed, her radiant appearance and graceful demeanour only served to enhance the captivating aura that surrounded her. Unaware of the admiring glances that trailed her wherever she went, Baha carried herself with a poise and elegance that seemed to transcend the typical trappings of adolescence, her every movement imbued with a sense of purpose and inner strength.

While her friends marvelled at Baha's intellectual prowess, it was in the moments when she allowed herself to truly engage with the material she was studying that her true beauty – both physical and mental – became most apparent. Her eyes would ignite with a passionate intensity, and her voice would resonate with a fervour that left all who heard her spellbound. In these fleeting instances, Baha's essence would shine forth, a rare and captivating blend of youthful vitality and profound wisdom.

After her matriculation, Baha secured admission to a renowned and prestigious higher secondary school where co-education was practiced. However, Baha remained aloof and did not mingle or form any close friendships with the boys, even though many of her male classmates were eager to befriend her.

Baha had an elder brother named Aftab, who was an avid cricket enthusiast. Aftab had made friends with two of his cricket teammates, Caesar and Gulzar. Caesar was a first-year Bachelor of Science student, while Gulzar had dropped out of school after tenth grade. Over time, Gulzar and Caesar began visiting Aftab's home more frequently.

It was during these visits that Caesar first encountered Baha, and he was immediately captivated by her ethereal beauty and quiet demeanour. Caesar started visiting the house more often, ostensibly to assist Baha with her studies, but his true motive was to get closer to her. Pretending to be interested in her academic progress, Caesar would seize every opportunity to interact with Baha, even in the absence of her brother Aftab.

Baha, being a reserved and focused student, remained unaware of Caesar's growing infatuation with her. Unaware of his true intentions, she welcomed his academic assistance, as she found certain topics challenging. Meanwhile, Caesar's visits became more frequent, as he sought to find ways to spend time with Baha and win her affection. He would meticulously prepare

study notes for her and patiently help her understand the concepts she struggled with.

To impress Baha, Caesar began to forgo his cricket matches and devoted more time to his studies, spending endless hours studying alongside her. As the months passed, Caesar's feelings for Baha deepened, and he longed to confess his love to her. However, he lacked the courage to do so.

One day, Caesar decided to seek advice from his close friend, Gulzar. Upon visiting Gulzar's home, Caesar finally mustered the courage to share his heart's desire. "Gulzar, I want to tell you that I am in love with Aftab's sister, Baha, and I believe she feels the same way about me. I want to express my love to her. What do you think I should do?"

To Caesar's surprise, Gulzar responded with an unexpected revelation, "What nonsense are you talking? Baha is in love with me," he said confidently. Caesar was taken aback and asked, "Has she confessed her love to you?"

Gulzar replied, "Her actions and behaviour clearly indicate that she loves me."

Caesar countered, "I am equally certain that she loves me."

"I don't believe it," Gulzar said firmly, leading to a moment of silence in the room.

Finally, Gulzar spoke up, "I want to tell you something important. Is friendship more important, or love? For me, friendship is the priority. I suggest that we both should distance ourselves from Baha to preserve our friendship. We shouldn't jeopardize our relationship just because of a girl."

Caesar mulled over Gulzar's words, recognizing the wisdom in his proposal. "You're right," he conceded. "Our

friendship is far more valuable than the pursuit of romance. We shall both refrain from visiting Baha's home from now on."

For nearly two weeks, Caesar resisted the urge to see Baha and did not go to her home. During this time, Gulzar became a constant presence in Caesar's life, visiting him daily and ensuring he stayed true to their pact.

One day, as Caesar was on his way to the market to buy mutton, he happened to pass by Baha's house. To his utter surprise, he saw Gulzar entering the very same abode they had both sworn to avoid. Caesar couldn't believe his eyes.

After completing his errand, Caesar decided to confront Gulzar and catch him in the act of breaking their solemn promise. As he approached Baha's home, he found Gulzar exiting, a sheepish expression on his face. Before Caesar could utter a word, Baha's mother greeted him warmly.

"Where have you been, my dear?" she asked with a smile. "I've been telling Gulzar about you every day."

Caesar's eyes twinkled with a mischievous glint as he caught sight of Gulzar across the room. He leaned against the doorframe, arms crossed, the hint of a smirk tugging at his lips. "I was busy with my studies," Caesar replied smoothly, masking the turbulence within.

The air in the room seemed to thicken, charged with an unspoken tension. Gulzar stammered, fumbling for an explanation, but Caesar remained silent, his expression a mixture of amusement and disappointment. Gulzar's shoulders slumped as he realized Caesar had already pieced everything together.

As the two walked back to Caesar's home, an uneasy silence hung between them, punctuated only by the crunch of gravel underfoot. By the time they arrived, the familiar warmth of Caesar's living room felt strangely foreign. Long shadows

stretched across the walls as the late afternoon sunlight filtered through the curtains.

Minutes dragged by as both men sat in their usual spots, neither daring to speak. Finally, Gulzar broke the silence. "Caesar," he began, his voice low and trembling, "I didn't mean to break our promise, but... I couldn't help it. My feelings for Baha—" He hesitated, searching for the right words. "They got the better of me. You know how much I value our friendship. I don't want this to ruin everything between us."

Caesar, who had been staring out of the window, turned to face Gulzar. His expression softened as he saw the genuine concern in his friend's eyes. "Maybe," Caesar said quietly, "but we can't pretend this didn't happen. We both care about Baha, and that's not something we can ignore. But we also can't let this destroy what we have."

The room fell silent again, the weight of their shared dilemma pressing down on them. Both knew this was a delicate matter, one misstep away from fracturing their bond forever.

After what felt like hours, Caesar finally spoke up. "Let's be honest with each other—and with Baha," he said with a determined look in his eyes. "We'll both tell her how we feel and let her decide. No matter what happens, our friendship stays intact."

Gulzar nodded, relief washing over him. It was a sensible solution, one that gave Baha the respect she deserved while preserving the bond between him and Caesar. They had always faced challenges together, and this would be no different.

But despite their resolve, Gulzar found himself struggling. Every time he tried to approach Baha, his heart would race, and his words would fail him. He had always been the more reserved of the two, preferring to keep his emotions hidden behind a calm

exterior. But now, those emotions were threatening to overwhelm him.

One day, Gulzar found himself alone with Baha in her room. The sunlight streaming through the windows bathed the room in a soft, golden light, creating a peaceful atmosphere. Baha was absorbed in her homework, her brow furrowed in concentration. Gulzar knew this was his chance, perhaps his only one.

Taking a deep breath, he walked over to her. "Baha," he began, his voice trembling slightly, "there's something I need to tell you." She looked up at him, her eyes wide with curiosity. Gulzar could feel his heart pounding in his chest, each beat louder than the last. "I... I have feelings for you," he managed to say, the words finally escaping his lips.

Baha blinked, her expression unreadable. For a moment, the silence in the room was deafening. Then, without a word, she returned to her homework, leaving Gulzar standing there, his heart sinking. He didn't know what to make of her silence, but he knew he had done what he could.

Meanwhile, Caesar took a different approach. Confident and direct, he waited for the perfect moment. That moment came one evening when he knew Baha would be home alone. The sky outside was painted in hues of orange and pink, the last remnants of daylight fading away.

Caesar knocked on her door, his heart steady with determination. Baha answered, surprised to see him but welcoming nonetheless. After exchanging a few pleasantries, Caesar took her hand and led her to the centre of the room. "Baha," he said softly, his voice laced with sincerity, "I need you to trust me for a moment."

Baha looked at him, slightly confused but intrigued. "Close your eyes," he instructed gently. She hesitated for a

moment but then complied, closing her eyes as requested. Caesar took a step closer, his heart beating in sync with the ticking clock on the wall. He leaned in, his lips brushing hers in a gentle, almost hesitant kiss.

When he pulled back, he whispered near her ear, "I love you, Baha. More than words can express. I can't imagine my life without you. Please, accept my proposal."

With that, Caesar turned and left, leaving Baha standing there in the fading light, her eyes still closed, her mind reeling from the sudden turn of events.

Days passed, and Baha found herself caught between two worlds. The quiet, deep affection of Gulzar, and the bold, passionate love of Caesar. Both men had laid their hearts at her feet, leaving the next move to her. But her heart wasn't the only thing pulling her in different directions; her ambition to excel in her studies and build a promising career added another layer to her struggle.

It was a heavy decision, one that weighed on her with each passing day. She decided to seek counsel and visited her uncle's home, where she confided in her cousin about the dilemma. Her cousins listened intently, offering a safe space for her to voice her fears and hopes. After much discussion, they unanimously advised her to consider Caesar.

Even with their advice, Baha remained in a whirlwind of uncertainty. Should she give her heart to Caesar, or stay focused on her dreams and aspirations? The question consumed her, leaving her restless.

As for Gulzar and Caesar, they waited with bated breath, the suspense of Baha's decision testing the very limits of their unbreakable bond. They knew that whatever happened, their friendship would be forever changed. But they also knew that, no

matter the outcome, they had been honest—with Baha, and with each other.

Finally, the day came. Baha returned home and wrote a letter addressed to both of them. She called them over and handed the letter to Caesar. Caesar and Gulzar went to a secluded spot to read the letter. When they opened it, the words that greeted them were simple yet profound: "You are both friends of my brother, and I want to make it clear that I have no personal interest in either of you. My focus is entirely on my studies, and I kindly ask you not to come to our home anymore. If this continues, I will have no choice but to inform my mom and brother, which will not be in your favour. Please stop trying to approach me from now on."

Caesar was disappointed so was Gulzar deeply dejected. Together, they tore the letter into pieces, a symbolic act of moving forward. From that moment on, both of them stopped approaching Baha. But the memory of that day, of the choices made and the friendship tested, would remain with them forever.

The bond between Caesar and Gulzar endured. It was different now, touched by the bittersweet reality of what had transpired, but it remained strong—a testament to the depth of their friendship and the respect they held for each other.



Soulmates



Latif stood at the bus stop, the early morning sun casting a gentle, golden glow over the bustling street. The world around him stirred to life with the rhythms of a city awakening—children laughed on their way to school, their vibrant energy breaking the soft hum of the morning. Bicycle bells chimed as riders wove deftly through the crowd, and the murmur of commuters' conversations filled the air. The street was alive, a canvas painted with the scents, sounds, and colours of life. The earthy aroma of freshly watered plants mingled with the faint tang of diesel fumes from the passing vehicles, while the warm, inviting scent of chai drifted over from a nearby tea stall.

Two vendors occupied their usual spots near the bus stop, their presence as much a part of the scene as the rising sun. The fruit vendor, a sprightly man with a perpetual smile, worked with practiced precision. His vibrant produce was an artful display—golden-yellow and crimson apples sat in separate crates, juicy oranges were stacked in perfect pyramids, and bananas lay neatly in rows, their bright yellow skins catching the sunlight. Beside him, the tea vendor, a middle-aged man with weathered hands, presided over his stall with quiet efficiency. A plume of steam rose from his kettle, curling into the crisp morning air. The rhythmic clink of glasses and the soothing sound of tea pouring into glasses added to the symphony of the street.

For Latif, this bustling corner was a small sanctuary—a place of routine and comfort. The tea stall, in particular, was a cherished refuge. Every morning, the vendor greeted him with a

familiar smile, and Latif would nod in acknowledgement, exchanging a few warm words before cradling a steaming glass of chai in his hands. These moments, however fleeting, grounded him. They were a balm against the chaos of life, a reminder of the small joys hidden in the ordinary.

That morning, however, Latif was in a hurry. His usual ritual of savouring chai was set aside as he anxiously checked his watch. He was running late, and the fear of missing his bus gnawed at him. The familiar rumble of an approaching bus broke his train of thought. He moved swiftly toward the curb, relief washing over him as the bus pulled up with a hiss of its brakes.

As Latif climbed aboard, he was greeted by the now-comforting familiarity of the morning crowd. Faces he had come to recognize over the months filled the bus—office workers, students, shopkeepers—all lost in their routines. Quiet conversations and the occasional burst of laughter added a hum of life to the confined space. As his eyes scanned the aisle, they landed on Vandana, seated by the window. Her face lit up with a warm smile, and Latif couldn't help but smile back. He made his way over to her, settling into the seat beside her.

Vandana, a schoolteacher known for her impeccable attire and composed demeanour, had always carried an air of quiet grace. Latif, a dedicated social welfare officer, often found himself on the same bus as her during their daily commutes. At first, their interactions were limited to fleeting glances and polite nods, their worlds brushing past each other like two pages in a book yet to be written.

One day, however, fate intervened. As Vandana alighted from the bus, her heel caught on a crack in the pavement. Her startled cry pierced the air as she stumbled, her bag slipping from her shoulder. Latif, watching from the bus window, reacted instinctively. He rushed to her side, catching her arm just in time to steady her.

"Are you alright?" he asked, his voice steady but laced with concern.

Vandana looked up, her cheeks flushed with embarrassment but her eyes grateful. "Yes, thank you," she murmured, brushing a stray strand of hair from her face.

Kneeling, Latif helped her collect her things, his movements careful and respectful. "Let me walk you to your school," he offered, his tone leaving no room for refusal. It wasn't a suggestion – it was the natural continuation of his instinct to protect.

As they walked, the awkwardness of the moment melted away. Vandana spoke about her students' upcoming exams, her voice animated with passion for her work, while Latif recounted a humorous incident from his latest project. By the time they reached the school gates, an unspoken understanding had blossomed between them, as though the universe had orchestrated the stumble to bring their paths closer.

From that day on, their bond deepened. Their bus rides became a cherished ritual, filled with laughter, shared stories, and quiet moments of understanding. Vandana would often save him a seat, greeting him with a warm smile that never failed to brighten his mornings. Occasionally, she would surprise him with homemade snacks. What had started as a routine encounter had evolved into something more—a friendship that shimmered with the possibility of unspoken emotions.

Yet beneath the surface of their blossoming relationship lay an unspoken truth. Both Latif and Vandana were married, though neither found solace within their unions. Latif's marriage to Suraiya was marked by conflict, their relationship a battlefield of unmet expectations and unspoken grievances. Vandana's life was no less solitary; her husband, Vivek, was often absent, his indifference creating a void that left her longing for connection. In each other, Latif and Vandana found a refuge—a sanctuary where

they could escape the weight of their realities and find comfort in shared moments.

That day, Latif had purchased a Nokia 3300, his first mobile phone. BSNL had recently launched mobile services in Kashmir, and Latif had managed to get a SIM card for himself. Vandana was delighted to see him with a new device, as they always celebrated each other's accomplishments. Curious and excited, she took the phone from him, exploring its features and figuring out how it worked. Throughout the entire journey, the two of them chatted enthusiastically about the phone, their conversation filled with excitement and curiosity until they finally reached their destination.

As the bus reached their stop in Magam, they alighted together, their offices just a short distance apart. Walking side by side, their laughter lingered in the crisp morning air, a testament to the connection they had forged. Amidst the hum of the town and the complexities of their lives, Latif and Vandana continued their quiet dance—a story unfolding with every shared moment, each one a step closer to something beautifully complicated yet undeniably real.

Latif and Vandana loved each other in a way that defied conventional definitions. Their love could perhaps be labelled "extramarital," though devoid of the physical intimacy typically associated with the term. Their bond was rooted in mutual understanding, an unspoken agreement to be each other's refuge from the turbulence of their respective marital lives. Together, they had carved out a hidden world, a fragile yet resilient space where they could simply exist without the weight of expectations or judgement.

In this secret realm, Latif and Vandana found solace and joy. They listened to each other's frustrations, laughed over shared jokes, and offered quiet reassurances that made life a little more bearable. The complexities of their own marriages—marked by

misunderstandings, unspoken grievances, or simply the erosion of time—seemed to dissolve when they were together. In these moments, they felt lighter, and freer, as though their burdens had temporarily been lifted.

Neither of their spouses knew about this bond, and perhaps it was better that way. What they shared wasn't about betrayal but survival—a way to keep going in lives that often felt too confining. And while their connection was free of physical transgressions, it carried its own emotional depth, rich with layers of affection, care, and a quiet longing that neither of them dared to name.

At around 4 P.M., as if drawn by an unspoken ritual, they met once again at the bustling Magam bus stop, a place that had become a silent witness to their routine. The air was filled with the hum of conversations, the honking of buses, and the occasional laughter of strangers, yet all of it seemed to fade into the background when they saw each other. Together, they boarded a bus headed toward Lal Chowk, the journey a cherished interlude between their separate lives.

As the bus moved along the winding roads, Vandana animatedly recounted the events of her day at school. Her voice carried a mix of warmth and excitement as she described the little joys and occasional challenges that filled her hours. Latif, ever the attentive listener, hung onto her every word, his eyes reflecting both admiration and the quiet comfort he felt in her company. He rarely interrupted, except for the occasional nod or a soft comment that showed he understood her world as if it were his own.

When the bus finally halted at Lal Chowk, their time together drew to its familiar conclusion. Stepping off, they were momentarily swept up in the bustle of the crowded marketplace. Yet, in their shared silence, they seemed untouched by the noise around them. As they reached the point where their paths inevitably diverged, Vandana turned to him with a soft smile, her

expression a blend of gratitude and something unspoken, something deeper.

Latif returned her smile, his gaze lingering just a moment longer than usual, as though trying to capture the fleeting warmth of the connection they shared. In those brief moments, it felt as though the noise of the world around them faded, leaving behind a fragile sanctuary—one carved out of stolen glances, shared silences, and the unspoken understanding that bound them. Though life pulled them in different directions, they both knew this delicate bond, however ephemeral, would endure until their paths crossed again.

Every day, without fail, Latif would wait at the bus stop, his heart quietly racing in anticipation. He boarded the same bus, his eyes instinctively searching for Vandana. She was always there, seated by the window, her presence like a steady beacon in the chaos of the day. Latif would sit beside her, the proximity alone filling him with an unexplainable contentment. In the evening, after their shared journey, he would accompany her to Lal Chowk before catching another bus to his home. This daily ritual was the thread that tied his ordinary life to something extraordinary—something he couldn't quite name but cherished deeply.

For Vandana, Latif was more than a companion; he was her anchor and her unwavering ally. To her, he was like a genie who would grant her wishes without hesitation, someone she could rely on without question. Whenever a problem arose or a task needed completing, Latif was the first person who came to her mind. He would step in with quiet determination, ready to shoulder any burden for her, no matter how odd or inconvenient it might be. His dedication wasn't born out of obligation but from an affection so pure it spoke volumes even in silence.

Though their connection seemed simple on the surface, it held a quiet depth. Vandana might not have said it aloud, but she

depended on Latif in ways she hadn't with anyone else. And Latif, in turn, found purpose in her reliance, each small act of service an unspoken declaration of the feelings he held in his heart. Their bond, delicate yet profound, was a testament to how extraordinary the ordinary could become when shared with the right person.

Over time, their relationship deepened into a connection that transcended labels. They had become inseparable, their lives woven together by the fabric of their daily routines. What began as companionship had quietly evolved into love—a love that was pure, untouched by physicality, and rooted in mutual respect and understanding. It was a bond that felt sacred, a quiet sanctuary in a chaotic world.

But one day, their tranquil world was disrupted. Vandana, who was usually calm and composed, appeared visibly upset. Latif noticed immediately and gently prodded her to share what was troubling her. At first, she hesitated, but then, as though a dam had burst, she revealed the source of her anguish.

Her husband had decided they must leave their home. Recent events had shaken the family to its very core—one of their relatives had been brutally killed by a militant. The tragedy not only shattered their sense of safety but instilled a deep, lingering fear that left no room for compromise. Her husband, resolute and pragmatic, believed the only way to protect his family was to relocate to Jammu, far away from the shadow of violence and instability. He began planning the move, even making arrangements to sell their home—a house filled with memories, laughter, and years of hard work.

For Vandana, the decision was not just a matter of practicality; it was an emotional reckoning. The home she had built, the memories she cherished, and the quiet bond she shared with Latif all seemed to hang in the balance. As she shared her worries with Latif, her voice trembled with a mix of fear, sorrow, and helplessness. She wasn't just losing her home; she was being

torn away from the person who had become an inseparable part of her life. Over the years, Latif had become much more than a friend—he was her confidant, her anchor in moments of despair, and a quiet yet profound presence in her life.

When Vandana shared her fears with Latif, her voice trembled with a mix of sorrow and helplessness. “How can I leave everything behind? This home... and you?” she asked, her eyes welling with tears.

Latif listened in silence, his heart heavy with her pain. The thought of losing Vandana felt unbearable. Yet, he knew he couldn’t ask her to stay, not when her safety was at stake. Struggling with his emotions, he finally whispered, “I don’t know how to live without you, Vandana.”

Placing her hand on his, Vandana offered a small, reassuring smile. “Latif, our bond isn’t so fragile that a little distance could break it. I will always be with you—in every way that matters. You have to promise me you’ll stay strong and believe in us.”

Moved by her words, Latif nodded. “I’ll be with you till my last breath,” he vowed.

When Vandana finally left for Jammu, it was one of the hardest moments of their lives. Latif felt an emptiness he couldn’t put into words, as if a piece of him had been taken away. But life moved forward, and with time, he found ways to stay connected. He began visiting Jammu occasionally, cherishing every stolen moment they shared. Their love found ways to bridge the distance—phone calls and whispered promises of unwavering loyalty.

Today, decades later, both Vandana and Latif are old. Latif spends much of his time surrounded by his grandchildren, their laughter filling his home with a new kind of joy. But almost every day, he picks up the phone to talk to Vandana. Their conversations

are as lively and heartfelt as ever—she still shares every little detail of her life, and he listens with the same quiet attentiveness that had once made her fall for him.

Their bond, forged in the crucible of separation and resilience, remains unbroken. It is a testament to the kind of love that isn't bound by time or distance—a love that lives in the small, daily acts of connection, in the memories they carry, and in the promises they've always kept. Everyone has a soulmate, and it doesn't matter if they're side by side or worlds away. True soulmates transcend distance, bound by a connection that defies space and time.



On a Quest for Truth



In the era of simplicity and limited resources in Kashmir, a tranquil peace of mind prevailed. During this time of heightened tolerance, people embraced diverse opinions with open minds, fostering lively debates and discussions, mostly held in shops, with tailor shops being a common venue.

In this golden age, a family existed, welcoming three sons and a sister into its midst. Latif was the eldest son, followed by Nayeem and the youngest was Qaiser. Despite facing numerous challenges, their mother harboured a strong desire to provide her children with a good education. Through various hardships and challenges, including sacrificing even household items to pay school fees, she ensured her sons received a quality education, a testament to her unwavering determination.

Nayeem stood out among the trio, radiating a distinct aura. If I were to choose an adjective to describe him, I would say he was truly angelic in nature. His demeanour was characterized by a serene tranquillity; he never uttered a word against anyone, harboured no thoughts of revenge, and rarely displayed any signs of anger. Nayeem embodied the essence of a peace-loving individual.

As the winds of communism swept through Kashmir, captivating the educated youth, Latif, one of them, encountered a transformative moment. He borrowed a book from the library titled "The Fundamentals of Marxism and Leninism," profoundly

altering his ideology and marking the beginning of his admiration for communism.

In the cozy confines of his home, he used to engage in profound discussions about communism, a fervour that resonated with his younger brother, Nayeem. The ideological influence took root, leading Nayeem to delve into the depths of literature on communism, extending beyond the seminal work, "Das Kapital."

Their local landscape featured a tailor shop, an intellectual hub owned by Ghulam Nabi, affectionately known as Nub-i-Mirzia. He was an ardent follower of Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, the founder of the Ahmadiyya movement in Islam. This shop became a gathering place for minds thirsty for knowledge, where vibrant discussions and debates unfolded regularly. Nub-i-Mirzia, a seeker of knowledge himself, avidly absorbed the diverse perspectives that frequented his shop.

During this era, dissenting opinions were not only tolerated but welcomed. A spirit of inquiry prevailed, and those with differing viewpoints were engaged in questioning rather than met with animosity. Nayeem, being an avid visitor to the tailor shop, emerged as a staunch defender of communism. His arguments often found opposition among the orthodox individuals who supported religious ideologies. Due to his unwavering commitment to communism, Nayeem acquired the moniker "Mao Zedong," a testament to the depth of his ideological alignment and the boldness with which he defended communism.

The debates used to be vibrant and intellectually stimulating, drawing eager anticipation from regular attendees who eagerly awaited the scheduled time. Nearly every evening, a substantial number of participants would gather at the shop, with Nayeem being a consistent member whose profound knowledge set him apart.

Recognizing Nayeem's intellectual depth, he was encouraged to explore the works of the German philosopher

Friedrich Nietzsche. Engrossed in Nietzsche's philosophy of Nihilism, Nayeem delved into the profound concepts that questioned conventional beliefs.

However, his intellectual journey took an unexpected turn when he accepted a managerial role in a company, diverting his attention and time away from the enlightening debates.

Despite his absence, Nayeem was sorely missed by the regulars who valued his insightful contributions. However, the demands of his new job left him with little opportunity to engage in the once-frequent intellectual exchanges at the shop. Instead, he became entangled in the intricacies of his managerial responsibilities, leaving behind the realm of philosophical exploration.

Yet, Nayeem's restless mind refused to settle. In the corporate realm, he took the initiative and laid the groundwork for unionism, displaying a tenacity for advocating workers' rights. This dedication did not go unnoticed, and Nayeem found himself elected as the General Secretary, a position that further consumed his time and attention.

The shift from intellectual pursuits to corporate responsibilities reflects the dynamic nature of Nayeem's journey. While his absence may have left a void in the shop's once-thriving debates, his newfound commitment to unionism and managerial responsibilities paints a different, albeit equally compelling, chapter in his life.

As time passed, he found contentment in his job and embraced his steadfast ideology. Amidst this, he entered into the realm of marriage, welcoming two daughters and a lively son into his life. Life flowed smoothly and all seemed serene until the 1990s when a sudden upheaval shook the foundations of normalcy.

The peaceful valley became a cauldron of unrest, marked by demonstrations, strikes, and attacks on Indian government

officials. Swiftly, militant groups emerged, casting a shadow of fear and chaos. The once peaceful haven witnessed a grim exodus, with over 200,000 Kashmiri pundits fleeing for their lives.

Amid this tumult, disquieting news reached Nayeem – whispers of militants plotting his murder due to his allegiance to communist ideals. The peaceful trajectory of his life took a perilous turn as he grappled with the looming threat, navigating the treacherous waters of political turmoil and personal safety.

In the initial days, a profound sense of relief washed over him as he departed from the valley, he found solace in Hyderabad, where he secured a modest rented room from Zaffar, a steadfast Muslim whose generosity knew no bounds. Eager to extend a gesture of camaraderie, Zaffar, noting Nayeem's Muslim background, invited him to join in daily prayers at the mosque. Despite Zaffar's persistent morning knocks for Fajr prayers, Nayeem skilfully evaded participation, employing various excuses.

As time unfolded, Zaffar discerned that Nayeem was not in the habit of praying *namaz* five times a day. Undeterred, Zaffar presented Nayeem with a Quran, encouraging him to delve into its verses. Accepting the holy book, Nayeem placed it on a shelf, intending to explore its contents at a later time. With an abundance of time at his disposal and a penchant for reading, Nayeem eventually decided to immerse himself in the Quran. However, he began reading it as he would any other book — not as a sacred text.

This pivotal moment marked the genesis of a transformative journey for Nayeem. Initially finding the text mundane, his perspective shifted dramatically when he encountered the verse questioning, "Afala ta'qilun?" — translating to "Will you not use your intellect?" This revelation illuminated the Quran's emphasis on critical thinking, prompting Nayeem to revisit its pages with renewed interest.

Gradually, the Quran unveiled its layers of depth, captivating Nayeem with its profound and inspirational content. What had once seemed uninteresting evolved into a source of enlightenment, guiding Nayeem on a profound path of transition from atheism to Islam. The Quran's encouragement of intellectual exploration became the catalyst for a remarkable metamorphosis in Nayeem's spiritual journey.

Initially, Nayeem began with praying once a day, gradually increasing to three times, excluding the morning and evening prayers. However, as he experienced inner peace and a soulful calmness, he felt compelled to embrace the full spectrum of spiritual practice, eventually adopting the discipline of praying five times a day. Reflecting on his journey, he saw his arrival in Hyderabad not merely as a geographical shift but as an integral part of his quest for truth.

In this profound transformation, Nayeem discovered a sense of truth that transcended his previous readings and beliefs. The quest for truth, which had once seemed incomplete, now felt whole and fulfilled. It was a realization that everything he had encountered before paled in comparison to the profound truth he found within the teachings of the Quran.

However, as Nayeem's transformation became evident to those around him, scepticism and doubt began to emerge. Friends and a few acquaintances questioned the sincerity of his newfound beliefs, accusing him of seeking recognition and respect in society. They failed to comprehend that his spiritual journey was an internal quest for truth and personal growth, unaffected by the opinions and judgments of others.

Nayeem remained unruffled by the criticism and continued to dedicate himself to his faith. He understood that societal acceptance was not the measure of his spiritual journey's authenticity. Instead, he found solace in the knowledge that he was living according to his own truth, guided by the teachings of the Quran.



A Champion of Social Justice



Malik Ghulam Ahmad was a towering figure in both stature and spirit, his tall and robust frame often draped in his signature white kameez shalwar – a reflection of his simplicity. His presence in the quaint town of Tankipora was both commanding and comforting, as he became a beacon of hope and reform. Known for his relentless dedication to uplifting his community, Malik was more than just a social reformer; he was a symbol of selflessness, embodying compassion and social responsibility in every aspect of his life. His actions were a testament to his unwavering commitment to the welfare of others, as he instinctively stepped forward whenever someone was in need, regardless of the magnitude of their troubles.

Malik Ghulam Ahmad's life was marked by a profound understanding of the societal pressures that often dictated the way people lived and celebrated milestones. He recognized the burden placed on families to host extravagant events, particularly weddings, where the expectation of lavish feasts and numerous mutton dishes in the traditional Wazwan often led to financial strain. In a society where status was often measured by the grandeur of such celebrations, Malik stood as a counter-narrative, promoting simplicity and sustainability.

When it was time for his own son's wedding, Malik chose to break away from the norm. He orchestrated a modest celebration that resonated with his principles, setting an enduring example for his community. The wedding feast, in stark contrast to the usual opulence, featured a humble yet tasteful array of dishes.

The menu highlighted wholesome vegetarian options like Haakh (a local leafy green), potatoes, quince apples, mushrooms and the comforting Nadru Yakhni, a fragrant dish made with lotus stems. Only one mutton dish was included, a deliberate choice that underscored Malik's message of moderation and sensibility.

This decision, though met with admiration from many who understood his intentions, was not without its critics. Some labelled Malik as a miser, failing to grasp the deeper purpose behind his choices. Yet, Malik remained undeterred, his resolve strengthened by his vision of a society liberated from the constraints of materialism and societal expectations. He aspired to inspire his fellow townsmen to reconsider their values, particularly around weddings and celebrations, encouraging a culture where love, commitment, and community support were prioritized over extravagance.

Through his actions, Malik Ghulam Ahmad sought to spark a broader dialogue about the societal customs that often dictated lives. He believed firmly that the essence of a wedding should be the love and commitment shared between the couple, rather than the opulence of the celebration itself. By advocating for simplicity, Malik endeavoured to create a more equitable society, one where families could celebrate milestones without the burden of financial strain. His legacy in Tankipora became one of compassion, restraint, and a relentless pursuit of a better, more understanding world.

One day, a shocking incident occurred in Tankipora. Ghulam Mohi-ud-din, the son of Haji Noor Mohammad—a man of considerable wealth and influence in the area—made the unexpected decision that left the community in turmoil. Despite being married to Raja Begum, with whom he shared two children, Ghulam Mohi-ud-din eloped with Hajra, a young woman from a modest background. The revelation spread like wildfire, becoming the sole topic of hushed conversations and public debates across the area. The audacity of a man of his stature choosing to leave his

family and partner with a woman from a lower socio-economic class sent shockwaves through the community. The incident not only brought disgrace to his family but also jeopardized the hard-earned respect of his father, Haji Noor Mohammad, a figure held in the highest regard in Tankipora.

For days, rumours swirled, and speculations grew. Some argued that Ghulam Mohi-ud-din was under the spell of love, while others whispered about darker, more scandalous motives. The community, accustomed to treating Haji Noor Mohammad with high regard, found it difficult to reconcile his son's impulsive actions with the family's esteemed status.

Eventually, the couple was discovered hiding on a rented houseboat. When confronted, Ghulam Mohi-ud-din's defiance crumbled under the weight of community pressure. Hajra was escorted back to her family home, but this did nothing to heal the damage done to the reputation of Haji Noor Mohammad.

The aftermath of the scandal was equally turbulent. Haji Noor Mohammad, devastated by humiliation, embarked on a relentless mission to salvage his family's reputation. The once-untarnished image of his household was now marred by whispers of disgrace, and Haji Noor's position in the community had become precarious. Determined to mitigate the damage and regain control over the narrative, Haji Noor Mohammad sought to erase any trace of this scandal, insisting that his son sever all ties with Hajra. He employed various influential members of the community to persuade Hajra's father to accept financial compensation, presenting it as a means to facilitate a proper marriage arrangement for his daughter.

Amidst the storm of turmoil and despair, Hajra's father found himself consumed by a crushing mix of shame and helplessness. In search of guidance and support, he turned to Malik Ghulam Ahmad, a man known for his wisdom and unwavering principles. With a heavy heart, he poured out his

grievances, recounting the painful details of the incident that had cast a shadow over his daughter's dignity.

Malik Ghulam Ahmad listened intently, his face reflecting a deep sense of resolve. To him, this was not just another scandal to be hushed up or ignored—it was a glaring injustice that demanded a bold and unflinching response. Without hesitation, he took a firm stand in support of Hajra, refusing to let societal pressures dictate the course of her fate. Determined to challenge the forces that prioritized wealth, power, and reputation over basic human decency, he rallied a group of prominent figures, including Sheikh Ghulam Ahmad and others of influence. Together, they formed a formidable front, prepared to defy the rigid conventions that sought to suppress the truth and silence the powerless.

For Malik Ghulam Ahmad, this was not merely about Hajra's plight; it was about confronting deeply ingrained practices that perpetuated injustice. He viewed Hajra's dignity as non-negotiable and argued that her honour could only be fully restored through marriage to Ghulam Mohi-ud-din. In his view, this was the only way to counter the stigma that had enveloped her following the scandal.

For Malik Ghulam Ahmad, this battle was about more than just Hajra—it was about justice itself. He saw in her plight a reflection of a broader struggle, one that pitted morality against hypocrisy and integrity against oppression. To him, Hajra's dignity was sacred, non-negotiable, and in dire need of restoration. He firmly believed that the only way to erase the stain of disgrace unfairly placed upon her was through marriage to Ghulam Mohi-ud-Din. In his eyes, this was not just a means of securing her future but a direct challenge to the stigma that had cruelly enveloped her in the wake of the scandal.

However, this proposal was met with resistance from Haji Noor Mohammad, the father of Ghulam Mohi-ud-din. He was willing to offer any amount of compensation to resolve the issue

but was steadfast in his refusal to agree to the marriage. This refusal set the stage for numerous heated discussions and negotiations, with Malik Ghulam Ahmad adamant that no amount of money could substitute for what he saw as the necessary solution—Hajra's marriage to Ghulam Mohi-ud-din. Malik Ghulam Ahmad's argument was rooted in the belief that, given the societal backlash against Hajra, securing this marriage was crucial for her future and reputation.

As the discussions progressed, the community of Tankipora became deeply divided. Divisions began to emerge, splitting the townsfolk into factions that either rallied around Haji Noor Mohammad or stood in solidarity with Malik Ghulam Ahmad. In a desperate attempt to secure his position, Haji Noor Mohammad attempted to sway Hajra's father further by offering a handsome sum of money, hoping to quash the dispute. However, Malik Ghulam Ahmad, resolute and unyielding, refused to compromise or let financial incentives dictate Hajra's fate.

Eventually, a crucial meeting was convened to facilitate a final resolution between Haji Noor Mohammad and the coalition led by Malik Ghulam Ahmad and Sheikh Ghulam Ahmad. This pivotal discussion stretched on for hours, laden with tension and a sense of urgency. Malik Ghulam Ahmad stood firm in his position, reiterating his demand that Hajra be married to Ghulam Mohi-ud-din. The atmosphere grew fraught as arguments clashed, fuelled by simmering emotions. At a particularly emotional juncture, Haji Noor Mohammad, overcome with frustration, dramatically placed his turban on the floor—a powerful and traditional symbol of humility and desperation. With tears in his eyes, he pleaded with the assembled group, declaring that the marriage would irrevocably tarnish the reputation of his daughters. His voice trembled as he appealed to their sense of compassion. To this, Malik Ghulam Ahmad responded with piercing conviction, "What of Hajra's reputation? Who will marry her now?" His words hung

heavy in the air, a poignant reminder of the injustice faced by women who were so often victimized by societal expectations.

The debate stretched late into the night, but the weight of community unrest and the undeniable logic of Malik Ghulam Ahmad's argument began to wear down Haji Noor Mohammad's resolve. Under mounting pressure, he finally conceded. The decision to allow Hajra to marry Ghulam Mohi-ud-din was not just a resolution to their conflict but a profound moment of triumph for those advocating for women's dignity.

In a gesture true to his values, Malik Ghulam Ahmad organized a modest wedding ceremony for the couple. The event eschewed the lavish traditions of Kashmiri culture, offering a simple meal of vegetable dishes rather than the customary and elaborate *Wazwan*. This understated celebration stood as a testament to the principles of humility.

As Hajra and Ghulam Mohi-ud-din exchanged vows, a quiet hope settled over the gathering. This was more than just the union of two individuals; it was a symbolic victory against the entrenched norms that often relegated women to the margins of decision-making. The community, once polarized, was left to reflect on the profound implications of the marriage.



Fatimah's Fateful Journey



Once upon a time in a quaint small village nestled between lush green hills, there lived a girl named Fatimah, the only beloved child of Khatijah and Maqbool. From her earliest days, Fatimah was a beacon of joy and light, illuminating every room with her captivating charm. Her emerald-green eyes sparkled with innocence, and her golden hair cascaded down her shoulders like rays of sunshine. To her parents, she was not just their daughter – she was their greatest blessing, their pride, and the very embodiment of their love.

Fatimah's laughter echoed through the village, a melody that turned ordinary days into memorable moments. Every corner of their humble home seemed to shine brighter when she was near, and her parents doted on her endlessly. She grew up in the warmth of their love, feeling secure and adored. It seemed nothing could ever disrupt their harmonious little world.

But as the seasons changed, so did the course of their lives. When Fatimah was just nine years old, a shocking twist awaited her. Her father, Maqbool, made an unforeseen decision to marry again, bringing Hameeda into their lives. This decision sent ripples of despair through the heart of Khatijah, who felt betrayed and abandoned. In her grief, Khatijah sought a divorce and returned to her father's home, leaving behind a trail of heartbreak that seemed impossible to heal. She made a choice that would forever shape Fatimah's life- she left her daughter behind, entrusting her to Maqbool's care. For Fatimah, the loss of her

mother was incomprehensible. One day, her world was filled with joy and love, and next, it was steeped in confusion and sorrow.

The once vibrant and loving home was now shrouded in sorrow. The worst sufferer in this upheaval was Fatimah, whose innocent world was turned upside down. Suddenly, the stability she had known was gone, replaced by an unsettling new reality.

Left with her father, Fatimah's world was no longer the same. The warmth and comfort that had once wrapped around her were stripped away. Her mother's departure left a void that her stepmother, Hameeda, could not fill. She was now under the care of her stepmother, Hameeda, who saw her as a burden rather than a daughter. Instead of nurturing her, Hameeda subjected Fatimah to cold indifference and cruel taunts. The harsh treatment became a daily ordeal for Fatimah, who bore it all in silence, hoping that one day, she might receive a fragment of the affection she once knew.

The bond with her father, once a source of strength and love, now felt fragile and distant. Maqbool, despite, his deep love for her daughter, was tragically oblivious to her suffering. His job kept him away for long hours, leaving Fatimah to fend for herself in an unkind world. Her cries for attention and love were lost in the noise of his busy life. The soothing embrace of her mother, Khatijah, became a haunting memory, a distant echo that danced on the edges of her dreams, teasing her with whispers of affection that were no longer hers.

Fatimah's childhood, once bright with laughter and adventure, was marred by a sense of destitution, not in material wealth but in emotional richness. She grew up in a house filled with people but devoid of love. Her thoughts often drifted back to her mother, wondering if she would ever return to rescue her from the clutches of misery.

As the years passed, Fatimah's resilience grew, but so too did the void in her heart. By the time she turned nineteen, her

father decided it was time for her to marry. Hameeda, ever eager to see her stepdaughter leave, was quick to support the decision. Initially resistant to the idea of marriage, she ultimately fell under the quiet, yet unyielding, influence of her father. Fatimah was married off to Noor Mohammad.

As she stepped into this new chapter of her life, Fatimah discovered a love that had eluded her for so long. Noor Mohammad entered her life like a soft breeze, carrying with him an unwavering kindness and a heart full of affection. He was a man who valued her deeply, a gentle soul who brought light and warmth to her world. From their very first interaction, a deep connection blossomed between them, one built not only on mutual respect but also on shared dreams and laughter.

Their love story grew into a beautiful life together, one that felt like a tapestry woven with threads of joy and hope. They became parents of four children- two lively daughters and two spirited sons- who brought unparalleled delight into their days. Their home, though modest in structure, overflowed with love and contentment. Afternoons were spent lazily watching their daughters play under the golden sun, their laughter filling the air like the sweetest melody. Evening, on the other hand, transformed into spirited gatherings as their sons filled the room with their boundless energy. These moments, no matter how simple, were treasures that Fatimah clung to, solidifying her belief that the happiness she had longed for was now her reality.

With Noor Mohammad by her side and their children at the heart of their world, Fatimah felt whole for the first time in her life. Together, they nurtured a home brimming with love, laughter, and unshakable faith in the future. It was a life of contentment and gratitude, where every day was a gift and every fleeting moment a reminder of the love and blessings they shared. She often found herself marvelling at how the universe had aligned so perfectly to give her this life - a life she never thought she deserved but one she embraced wholeheartedly.

But, as life often unfolds its narrative, there lingered an undercurrent of uncertainty that Fatimah could not yet perceive. Just as her heart had found its rhythm, the tide turned with an unforgiving swiftness. In a tragic twist of fate, the very foundation of her happiness was ripped away when, without warning, Noor Mohammad collapsed one fateful morning, succumbing to a heart attack that snatched him away from Fatimah and their children in the blink of an eye. The world Fatimah had lovingly built shattered around her; despair darkened her once-bright horizon. In her heart, she felt a shifting darkness, an overwhelming void where joy and comfort once resided, leaving her utterly bereft and alone, shouldering the weight of four helpless infants.

In those harrowing days and weeks that followed, Fatimah found herself adrift in a sea of grief. She was at a loss for what to do next. In a moment that should have been filled with compassion, her in-laws turned cold. Overwhelmed with grief and unsure of her next steps, Fatimah found herself standing at a crossroads, forced to choose a path she had never envisioned. With no alternatives on the horizon, she sought refuge in the one place she could trust—her mother's home. Khatijah, her mother, lived with her two brothers, Gh Rasool and Bashir Ahmad. They welcomed her and her children with open arms, offering the comfort and solidarity that had become an urgent necessity.

Utilizing the warmth and affection of her family, Fatimah found solace. With determination burning in his heart, Bashir Ahmad rose to the occasion, nurturing a vision of stability and hope for his niece and her children. He ingeniously sold some of Fatimah's gold jewellery and withdrew money from his own provident fund, pooling their meagre resources to secure a fresh start for the family. His efforts culminated in the acquisition of a small plot of five marlas, where he built a modest two-room house that would serve as a new sanctuary for Fatimah and her children.

Now living in this small house with her four infant children, Fatimah faced immense challenges. Raising them alone,

without much support, felt like an unending struggle. A single woman with four children seemed like a nightmare, and life appeared endlessly dark. Yet, she refused to give in to despair. With unwavering courage, she confronted the harsh realities of life, determined to provide her children with an education.

But her misfortunes were far from over. Just as her children began to come into their own, the spectre of militancy erupted in Kashmir, shattering the fragile peace that had settled over their lives. In an unfortunate twist of fate, her younger son, Javid, succumbed to the allure of rebellion and joined a militant organization, leaving home for Pakistan to receive arms training. The weight of despair crashed down on Fatimah like an unrelenting storm. Desperate and heartbroken, she wept for her son, her cries echoing through the empty halls of their home, pleading with anyone who could help bring him back. Yet, her cries seemed to vanish into the void, unheard and unanswered. Javid was ensnared in a world far removed from her love and guidance, trapped in a land where echoes of violence drowned out the tender calls of a mother's heart.

As time wore on, the depths of Fatimah's despair began to show signs of healing. When her elder son, Mohd Yousuf, secured a job in the forest department, hope ignited within her heart once more. It was as though the flickering light of fortune had finally found its way back into her life. With time, their financial hardships started to recede, and they began to carve out a life that resembled happiness. With renewed determination, Fatimah arranged a simple yet heartfelt wedding for him, steering clear of extravagant celebrations that could burden their limited resources. The bride was welcomed with open arms into Fatimah's home, ushering in dreams of family unity and joy. Fatimah found herself nurturing dreams of a cohesive family – a sanctuary built on love, laughter, and mutual support. The house came alive with excitement and the energy of fresh dreams as the new bride settled in.

Nonetheless, the clouds of joy lingered only briefly. Just as it seemed that a sense of stability was within reach, unforeseen tensions began to arise. Mohd Yousuf's wife voiced her unwillingness to remain in the household, preferring to carve out a life separate from Fatimah's watchful embrace. This revelation shook the fragile foundation of Fatimah's newfound happiness. Faced with this unforeseen rift, Mohd Yousuf ultimately chose to leave, moving to another town with his wife and further compounding Fatimah's struggles, leaving her to navigate the complexities of life alone once again.

Now left with two daughters, Fatimah grappled with the daunting reality of her solitude. The absence of a male figure in the household made the already difficult terrain of life feel even more treacherous. The weight of her daughters' future pressed heavily on her shoulders, and she found herself consumed by an increasing anxiety regarding their marriage prospects. In hopes of securing suitable matches for them, Fatimah reached out to several matchmakers, yet one rejection followed another, leaving her feeling increasingly disheartened. Each failed attempt deepened the furrows on her brow, heightening her sense of urgency and despair.

Yet, despite the overwhelming obstacles, Fatimah refused to succumb to despair. Her unwavering perseverance seemed to stir the universe, and after two long years of tireless searching, her prayers were finally answered. Promising matches were found for both of her daughters, bringing a wave of relief and gratitude that filled her weary heart. Determined to give her daughters the joyful beginnings they deserved, Fatimah threw herself into planning their weddings. Every detail, no matter how small, was meticulously arranged by her, a labour of love that left her both exhausted and fulfilled.

As the wedding days approached, Fatimah found herself swept up in a whirlwind of emotions. There was joy and pride in seeing her daughters step into a new chapter of their lives, but

there was also an aching sorrow for the loneliness that would now envelop her home. When the day finally arrived, the air was filled with laughter, music, and the bittersweet sound of goodbyes. With trembling hands and a heart full of blessings, Fatimah bid farewell to her daughters, sending them into their new lives with prayers for their happiness.

As the house quieted after the celebrations, fate left Fatimah once again in the solitude of her home, her heart a mixture of pain and peace. She had weathered storms that could have broken anyone, and though her solitude remained, she found solace in knowing she had done everything in her power to secure her children's futures. Life had tested her time and again, but in her resilience, she discovered a strength that even she hadn't known she possessed. And though the silence in her home was heavy, Fatimah's spirit remained unbroken, ready to face whatever lay ahead.

Javid's whereabouts lingered like an unhealed wound, a painful mystery that gnawed at her soul. Meanwhile, Mohd Yousuf had also chosen a path that led him far from hers. Her daughters, now women with their own lives, ambitions, and dreams, were scattered in different directions, carving out new adventures for themselves. Their absence, though filled with pride and love for their achievements, left a palpable emptiness in her heart. The house, once a lively refuge, now felt like a hollow shell—a constant reminder of the bitter loneliness she had been forced to accept, a solitude that whispered of days gone by and dreams unfulfilled.

In those quiet moments, Fatimah closed her eyes, memories flooding her mind—the essence of her childhood, a time when she too had felt abandoned, left at the mercy of a stepmother when her father remarried. The ghosts of her past whispered in her ears, guiding her to reflect on where her tumultuous journey had begun and where it might lead her in the future. The weight of her life experiences pressed heavily upon her, but beneath the layers of

struggle and sorrow, a flicker of resilience remained, emblematic of a woman who, despite the shadows that enveloped her, had always fought fiercely for the futures of those she loved.

As she lay in the stillness of the night, Fatimah allowed herself the quiet indulgence of rest. Her head rested softly against the pillow, and she sought solace in the embrace of sleep. Though the shadows of the past loomed large, they no longer had the power to consume her. She had faced the storms, survived the cold, and still stood tall, ready to meet whatever came next.



Murder of a Merchant



In the quiet hours of dawn, a haunting cry pierced the air, emanating from the abode of the cloth merchant, Shakeel. The anguished wail swept through the neighbourhood, knocking on the doors of slumbering homes, jolting the residents awake. Concerned faces peered out through windows, and soon a small crowd began to gather outside Shakeel's home, their subdued murmurs a symphony of shared worry and inquiry.

Uzma, Shakeel's beloved wife, had reached out to her brother-in-law and her father, urgently informing them of her husband's immobility and unresponsiveness. With a sense of urgency driving them, both relatives, who resided in close proximity, raced to Uzma's side, heeding her plea for assistance.

In a matter of moments, they arrived at Shakeel's door, their hearts heavy with an impending sense of grief. As they hurried to Shakeel's dwelling, the morning light had just begun to cast its delicate glow upon the world, serving as a poignant and gentle reminder of life's enduring cycle. Yet, within the walls of Shakeel's home, this melancholic scene unfolded in stark contrast, as the light of day bore witness to the abrupt and inexplicable departure of a cherished soul.

Upon their arrival, the gravity of the situation weighed heavily upon them, as they were confronted with the devastating truth. Shakeel, a pillar of strength and warmth in their lives, lay still and silent, his earthly journey has come to an unexpected and unfathomable end. Dismay and disbelief mingled in the sombre air, and a profound sense of loss enveloped the room, casting a

shadow upon all who stood witness to this tragic occurrence. There, lying motionless on the bed, laid Shakeel in eternal repose.

The suddenness of Shakeel's passing left those gathered in the throes of disbelief and despair, their hearts heavy with the weight of his absence. Uzma, her eyes filled with tears and her spirit shattered, sought solace in the comforting embrace of her grieving relatives, finding fleeting moments of respite in their shared sorrow. They stood united in their grief, drawn together by the unyielding bonds of family and the ache of an irreparable loss.

Amidst the shroud of mourning, memories of Shakeel's life and the legacy he left behind began to intertwine with the grief that enveloped those who mourned him. Stories of his benevolence and his endearing laughter echoed through the hearts of all who shared in his memory, kindling a bittersweet warmth within the vast expanse of their sorrow. Each tale, each shared smile, and each lingering embrace became threads in the tapestry of remembrance, weaving together a tribute to a life well-lived and a spirit that would forever illuminate the lives of those he had touched.

Shakeel first laid eyes on Uzma at a friend's wedding. As Uzma danced gracefully in the women's tent, Shakeel, by pure chance, found himself drawn towards her. It was love at first sight.

Unable to keep his eyes away from her mesmerizing moves, Shakeel couldn't resist the urge to get closer to Uzma. They say fate weaves its thread in unseen, mysterious ways, binding hearts long before they realize it. Stepping into the tent, he stood silently, mesmerized, as Uzma swayed gracefully to the rhythm.

Over time, Shakeel found himself captivated by Uzma's beauty, intelligence, and compassionate nature. He couldn't help but follow her wherever she went, hoping to catch another glimpse

of her enchanting smile. It wasn't long before he built up the courage to send a proposal through Uzma's friend, Asiya.

To Shakeel's disappointment, Uzma did not immediately concede to his proposal. Undeterred, Shakeel continued to follow her, hoping to win her heart. As time went by, their paths crossed more frequently, allowing them to develop a deeper connection.

Eventually, Uzma's heart melted under Shakeel's persistent affection. She realized that Shakeel's intentions were pure, and she too fell deeply in love with him. They started dating, cherishing every moment spent together, and forging a bond that only grew stronger with time.

As their love blossomed, Shakeel knew it was time to take the relationship to the next level. With nerves and excitement intertwined, he approached his parents to share his desire to marry Uzma. However, to his dismay, his affluent parents did not approve of the match. They believed Uzma's low middle-class background would not be a suitable match for their son.

Despite facing resistance from his parents, Shakeel's love for Uzma remained unwavering. He understood that love transcends societal boundaries and that he couldn't imagine a life without her. Love is a battle – one that must be fought with unwavering courage until it's truly won. Determined to fight for their love, Shakeel remained adamant and continued to persuade his parents.

Gradually, the walls built by societal norms began to crumble as Shakeel's unwavering dedication to Uzma touched the hearts of his parents. They witnessed his genuine love and conviction, realizing that happiness lies not in material wealth but in the presence of a loving and supportive partner. Reluctantly, they eventually agreed to Shakeel's wish, acknowledging the love between him and Uzma.

With both families on board, Shakeel and Uzma embarked on a journey towards happily ever after. Amidst the joyous celebrations and fervent anticipation, they exchanged vows, promising to stand by each other's side through thick and thin.

Shakeel's unwavering determination to marry the woman he loved had triumphed over societal expectations and financial disparities. It served as a powerful reminder that love, when genuine and pure, can conquer all obstacles and bring people from different walks of life together.

Shakeel's sudden and unexpected death left his family and friends with a lingering sense of unease. Although the official cause of death was believed to be a heart attack, those who prepared his body for burial noticed some peculiarities that raised suspicions. The body was surprisingly stiff and unusually cold, which was uncommon for a natural death. Additionally, they observed peculiar marks on Shakeel's neck, although they couldn't immediately suspect any foul play.

As the news of Shakeel's passing spread, family members and well-wishers gather to console Uzma and her family. Uzma's own family members expressed concern, adding to the growing scepticism. During a conversation, one of her uncles cautiously dared to ask her if she had not sensed anything unusual while she slept beside Shakeel's lifeless body throughout the night. This question struck a nerve, stirring a mix of anger and defensiveness in Uzma. She strongly rejected any implications of wrongdoing. Deeply upset by the insinuation, she confided in her mother, expressing her frustration. She insisted that her uncle's questions were causing her unnecessary distress.

As days passed, other peculiarities came to light, further fuelling suspicions surrounding Uzma. One notable red flag was her lack of profound grief and distress—a striking contrast to what one would expect from someone who had just lost a loved one

with whom they had spent twelve years. Her behaviour seemed detached and lacked the heartfelt emotion that typically accompanies the loss of a spouse.

The mounting concerns and unanswered questions compelled some family members to delve deeper into Shakeel's sudden demise and Uzma's potential involvement. They began discreetly seeking information to substantiate their doubts, determined to uncover the truth behind the mysterious circumstances surrounding Shakeel's death. Their search for answers and justice would become a winding path, full of unexpected twists and revelations that would test their resolve and challenge their bonds of trust within the family.

Little did they know that their journey to uncover the truth would not only reveal the secrets hidden within Shakeel's life but would also force them to confront their own vulnerabilities, truths, and the dark shadows that can sometimes lurk behind seemingly ordinary lives.

Following the tragic and untimely death of her husband, Uzma found herself enmeshed in a troubling web of suspicion and accusations that overshadowed her period of mourning. Her in-laws, already reeling from the loss of their son, Shakeel, began to scrutinize her behaviour, finding it increasingly unusual for a grieving widow. Uzma's frequent and excessive use of her phone became a focal point of their concern, fuelling doubts about her intentions and actions.

Determined to uncover the truth behind what they perceived as unsettling behaviour, Uzma's father-in-law decided to take decisive action. He invited Uzma's father and brother to a serious meeting, where the family openly discussed their growing apprehensions. During this conversation, her father-in-law shared startling accounts from the past—incidents that they believed implicated Uzma in Shakeel's death. These revelations cast an

even darker cloud over the situation, intensifying the family's resolve to confront her.

United in their concern, the family urged Uzma's father and brother to question her directly. They pressed her on her excessive phone usage and other behaviours they deemed suspicious, hoping to extract some clarity from her responses. Yet, despite the mounting allegations and the grim narrative taking shape around her, Uzma remained unwavering. She adamantly denied any involvement in her husband's death, maintaining her innocence even as the accusations threatened to consume her.

Unable to bear the burden of doubt and suspicion any longer, Shakeel's grief-stricken father found himself unable to accept her explanations. Convinced that something was amiss, he made a brave decision to seek justice for his deceased son. Overwhelmed by the troubling circumstances surrounding Shakeel's death, he approached the local police station and filed a complaint, suspecting foul play. Moved by his plea, the police station initiated an inquest under section 174 of the Code of Criminal Procedure (CrPC), signalling the beginning of a thorough investigation.

As the investigation progressed, Shakeel's family, desperate for closure and perhaps a glimmer of truth, requested the exhumation of his body. A team of esteemed forensic experts from the prestigious Government Medical College's forensic department, accompanied by doctors from the health department, meticulously carried out the exhumation process. With great care and attention to detail, they conducted a comprehensive autopsy, which held the potential to shed light on the mysterious circumstances surrounding Shakeel's demise.

To the astonishment of all involved, the autopsy results revealed a chilling and heartbreaking truth—the cause of Shakeel's death was determined to be strangulation. This shocking revelation sent shockwaves through the grieving family and the community

at large, leaving everyone reeling with a mix of sorrow and righteous anger.

As the investigation deepened, the focus turned to a mysterious phone number that Shakeel had shared with his cousin before his death. The cousin, realizing the importance of the number, passed it on to the police. Tracing the number led police to a man named Tanveer. His phone records revealed frequent contact with another number registered under the name of Suhail from Sopore. However, further probing revealed that the number wasn't being used in Sopore – it was being used in Srinagar, and shockingly, Uzma was the one using it.

This revelation raised critical questions for the investigators. Why would Uzma be using another individual's SIM card? What connection did she have with both Tanveer and Suhail?

Armed with this irrefutable evidence, the investigation took a sharp turn. The suspicions that had plagued Uzma were not in vain; they now carried significant weight. The police, fuelled by a renewed sense of determination, intensified their efforts to uncover the truth and bring those responsible for Shakeel's untimely death to justice.

The once-grieving widow, Uzma, now found herself at the centre of a criminal investigation, her actions and motivations under intense scrutiny. The wheels of justice began to turn, leaving a community grappling with disbelief, grief, and a thirst for answers. As the investigation unfolded, it became clear that there was more to Shakeel's death than initially met the eye.

With each passing day, the truth inched closer to the surface, propelled by the relentless pursuit of justice and the unwavering determination of those seeking answers. However, the twists and turns that lay ahead would uncover a complex web of secrets, lies, and betrayals, ultimately revealing the shocking truth behind Shakeel's tragic demise.

Further investigations revealed that Tanveer was a respected Moulvi in the community, known for his eloquent Friday sermons. Shakeel, impressed by the Moulvi's oratory skills, had frequently invited him to their home for meals, forging a seemingly innocent friendship. However, this relationship took a sinister turn as Uzma and the Moulvi grew dangerously close, engaging in a secretive affair. Shakeel, eventually suspecting his wife's infidelity, began distancing himself from the Moulvi, but the latter continued to visit in Shakeel's absence.

As tensions escalated, Uzma and the Moulvi devised a chilling plan to eliminate Shakeel. On the fateful night of March 10, Uzma laced her husband's milk with sedatives, rendering him unconscious. She then left a window ajar, allowing the Moulvi to enter undetected. Together, they asphyxiated Shakeel, ensuring his death appeared natural. As dawn broke, the Moulvi fled the scene, leaving Uzma to maintain the facade of a grieving widow.

However, their carefully orchestrated plan unravelled under the scrutiny of law enforcement. Both Uzma and the Moulvi eventually confessed to their prolonged affair and their heinous crime. Their intent, they admitted, had been to clear the path for marriage.



Toy Shop



Arsalan was a man of simple tastes and even simpler dreams. He had never sought wealth or grandeur, content with the modest toy shop he owned at the corner of the bustling Khanyar Chowk. The shop was small, tucked away between a bakery and a stationery store, but it had become a beloved part of the neighbourhood. Over the years, Arsalan had built a reputation for selling toys that brought joy to children from every walk of life. The shelves, though not vast, were always stocked with carefully chosen items that appealed to the young and the young at heart. Wooden trains, soft plush animals, colourful kites, and spinning tops—it was a wonderland for the kids who visited regularly.

Arsalan wasn't wealthy by any stretch of the imagination, but his earnings were enough to ensure a comfortable, albeit humble, life for his family. His wife, Amina, kept the household running smoothly while his young daughter, Sheerin, was the light of his life. Every day, after closing the shop around 7 pm, Arsalan would walk home with a small bag of treats—usually Sheerin's favourite chocolates or a handful of sweets from the bakery next door. Sheerin would greet him at the door with a squeal of delight, her face lighting up at the sight of her "baba" and the goodies he brought. These moments, filled with laughter and love, were the highlight of Arsalan's day.

The toy shop, though unremarkable in appearance, held a special place in Arsalan's heart. It wasn't just a business to him; it was a labour of love, a way to connect with the community and, in his own small way, to spread happiness. He cherished the conversations with customers, the excited faces of children picking out their favourite

toys, and the quiet satisfaction of knowing he had created a little haven of joy in the bustling city. Life was simple, but it was good.

But that tranquillity was soon disrupted.

One morning, as Arsalan was preparing to open his shop, he noticed something different across the street. Where there had once been an empty lot, there now stood a gleaming, brightly lit building. A large, colourful sign announced the grand opening of a sprawling toy store—modern, sleek, and much larger than Arsalan's humble establishment. It was the kind of place that immediately drew attention, with its glass windows showcasing a dazzling array of the latest toys, electronic gadgets, and flashy displays that could mesmerize any child.

A sense of unease settled in Arsalan's chest as he looked at the new competition. This was no ordinary store; it was a franchise, part of a well-known chain that could afford to offer the latest, trendiest toys at prices Arsalan could never match. His quaint little shop suddenly seemed even smaller, and the thought of losing his loyal customers to the flashy new rival gnawed at him.

As the days passed, the looming presence of the new store began to affect Arsalan's business. The steady stream of customers that once filled his shop started to dwindle, many lured away by the bright lights and alluring discounts of the competitor. Children who used to visit his store now gazed in awe at the towering displays across the street, dragging their parents towards the new shop with eager hands. It pained Arsalan to watch, but he understood the allure. His shop, with its wooden shelves and hand-picked toys, simply couldn't compete with the glitzy, modern experience offered by his rival.

It was painful for Arsalan to witness. He understood the allure of the sleek, modern store with its automated checkout and endless discounts. His own shop, with its creaking wooden floors, hand-carved shelves, and a carefully curated selection of toys, felt outdated in comparison. The charm that once drew customers in now seemed like a relic of a bygone era.

The effects of this change were far-reaching. His daily sales, once reliable, had now dropped to a trickle. Some days, Arsalan would go the entire day without a single customer walking through the door. The financial strain weighed heavily on him. His income was no longer enough to support his family as it once had. Little by little, the joy Arsalan once took in his work began to fade, replaced by the gnawing anxiety of an uncertain future.

At home, the strain of his failing business was palpable. Arsalan's daughter, once accustomed to the little treats he'd bring home after work—like chocolates or small toys—now ran to greet him each evening with hopeful eyes, only to be disappointed. She would hug him tightly, her small arms wrapped around his waist, and ask, "Baba, did you bring me something today?" Arsalan's heart broke every time he had to tell her no. He could no longer afford the small luxuries he used to bring her, and each time she walked away, her shoulders drooping with sadness, it weighed heavier on him.

The financial pressure began to erode his peace of mind, and slowly, it started to affect his relationship with his wife. Arguments flared up over the smallest things—his short temper and frustration bubbling over into their conversations. Once, they would laugh together about the little mishaps of daily life, but now every word felt like a potential spark for a fight. The stress of keeping the business afloat and the disappointment he felt in himself spilled into their home. Arsalan was no longer the patient, warm man he once was. He became irritable, snapping at his wife for things that weren't her fault, angry at the world for putting him in this position, and even angrier at himself for not being able to fix it.

The weight of these unspoken worries hung in the air like a heavy fog, clouding his thoughts and seeping into every corner of his life. Arsalan knew he had to find a way forward, but each passing day felt like a step deeper into the abyss. His business was faltering, his family was suffering, and the path ahead seemed more uncertain than ever.

One afternoon, as Arsalan was at his shop, already stressed about the mounting bills and dwindling customers, a neighbour rushed in with alarming news. His daughter had been rushed to the hospital with severe abdominal pain. Without a moment's hesitation, Arsalan slammed the shutters of his shop and raced to the hospital, his heart pounding with fear.

When he arrived, he found his daughter lying on a hospital bed, pale and in obvious discomfort. His wife sat by her side, her face etched with worry. Arsalan's throat tightened as he approached, his voice barely above a whisper when he asked, "What happened to her?"

His wife recounted the events in a wavering tone, the uncertainty in her words mirroring the gnawing unease that gripped Arsalan's heart. He left the room to find the doctor, his footsteps heavy with dread. A senior doctor assured him that his daughter was stable, that it was likely a minor issue, and they would need to keep her overnight for observation. Arsalan breathed a sigh of relief, but the nagging sense of unease refused to dissipate.

The next morning, as a team of doctors made their rounds, they paused at his daughter's bed. The senior doctor looked over the ultrasound results and his expression shifted slightly—a change so subtle Arsalan almost missed it, but it sent a chill through him. The doctor explained that there was an abnormality, a mass near her pancreas. Further tests would be required to determine the nature of the issue. Arsalan's already fragile world began to fracture, his heart shattering as he processed the gravity of the situation.

Two days later, the diagnosis came: it was pancreatic cancer. Arsalan's world crumbled around him. His little girl, his pride and joy, was battling something far more insidious than they had ever imagined. And as if the emotional blow wasn't enough, the doctors explained that the treatment would be incredibly expensive.

Arsalan felt utterly powerless. He began making frantic phone calls, reaching out to friends, family, and anyone he could think of who might be able to help financially. But one by one, they turned him down, either unwilling or unable to offer assistance. Each refusal felt like another door slamming shut, another reminder of how alone he was in this battle. The stress mounted, a crushing burden that left him sleepless and hollow.

Desperate, Arsalan came to a painful decision: he would have to sell his shop. It was the only way to gather the money needed for his daughter's treatment. The shop was more than just his livelihood—it was a symbol of his hard work, his independence, and the future he had dreamed of building for his family. Selling it felt like cutting away a piece of himself, but he knew he had no choice. His daughter's life was worth far more than any material possession.

With a heavy heart, Arsalan finalized the sale and secured the necessary funds. His daughter underwent treatment, and after two long, gruelling years, she was finally declared cancer-free. The relief that washed over him was overwhelming, but it was tempered by the knowledge that everything he had worked for was now gone. The shop—his source of pride, his dream—was no longer his.

As the months passed, Arsalan found himself adrift. His daughter was healthy again, and for that, he was endlessly grateful. But without the shop, he felt unmoored, uncertain of what to do next. He had sacrificed everything for his family, and now, standing at the crossroads of his life, he realized he would have to start over from nothing.

The toy shop had been more than just a business—it had been an extension of his soul. Now, with his family's well-being restored, Arsalan found himself faced with a different kind of survival: the survival of his own identity and purpose.

Each day brought with it an uneasy sense of limbo, as Arsalan navigated the uncharted terrain of a life without his shop. He had no savings to fall back on, no clear plan, and no obvious

path ahead. He explored various opportunities, dabbling in odd jobs and attempting different trades, but none of them seemed to fit. The pressure to provide for his family pressed heavily on him, a weight that grew with each passing day.

The city around him seemed to move forward, but Arsalan felt left behind, trapped in a cycle of yearning for what he had lost. The world of toys, a world he had loved and thrived in, now seemed out of reach. He wandered the streets, searching for a job, for a sign of where to go next, but nothing spoke to him the way his shop once had. The sight of other shopkeepers tending to their businesses only deepened his sense of loss, as if they were tending to a dream that had slipped from his grasp.

One day, as if led by fate's bittersweet hand, Arsalan found himself standing before a newly opened toy shop, its gleaming windows reflecting the sunlight like a beacon of opportunity and sorrow. It was directly across the street from where his own shop had once stood. The sight struck him with a force he hadn't expected, a flood of memories and emotions that nearly brought him to his knees. Yet, instead of turning away, Arsalan gathered his courage and stepped inside, and with a quiet resolve, asked for a job.

The owners, eager to staff their new store, recognized the wealth of experience Arsalan carried with him. They offered him a position as a salesman, an offer he accepted with quiet dignity. His expertise in the trade made him a valuable addition. Yet, every day as he left the shop, Arsalan would glance across the street, his heart heavy with longing as he looked at the shop that had once been his. Now occupied by a furniture dealer, the building stood as a silent reminder of everything he had sacrificed.

The pain of his loss was a constant companion, never sharp but always there, like a persistent ache that dulled the edges of his joy. Arsalan would often stand in the fading light of evening, watching his own shop from a distance.



The Misadventures of a Naughty Boy



Upon entering the world, his arrival was marked by a resounding cry that echoed through the delivery room, catching the attention of all who were present. The doctor, taken aback by the sheer intensity of the cry, couldn't help but remark, "A lion's cub is indeed a lion." The boisterous beginning set the stage for a life filled with vibrant energy and curiosity.

The choice of a name for this remarkable child became a topic of great debate among his family. They deliberated for days, contemplating the significance and impact that a name could have on one's life. Finally, the consensus settled on the name Aaliyan, a moniker destined to encapsulate his unique essence.

As he progressed through infancy, his mischievous nature began to unfurl. During the crawling phase, he discovered the art of concealment, often seeking refuge beneath the sanctuary of his bed. His doting mother, filled with a blend of concern and amusement, embarked on playful searches, scanning every nook and corner to unveil the hiding adventurer. It was in these moments that the true extent of his naughtiness became apparent, painting the canvas of his childhood with anecdotes of discovery and laughter.

From the moment he took his first steps, it seemed as though the entire household was in for a wild ride. Little Aaliyan, full of energy and curiosity, began to explore every nook of their

humble abode. No room was spared from his tiny, wandering feet, and he left a trail of chaos in his wake.

Aaliyan's restlessness and never-ending inclination to roam from one room to another soon became a headache for the entire family. His parents and even the other family members found themselves constantly on edge, trying to anticipate where Aaliyan would venture off to next. What started as an innocent curiosity quickly turned into a daily game of hide and seek, where every family member became responsible for keeping an eye on the mischievous toddler.

His incessant roaming didn't stop with the bedrooms and living spaces. Aaliyan, determined to leave no stone unturned, even found his way into the kitchen cupboards and drawers. Pots and pans would crash to the floor as his tiny hands rummaged through the pots and pans, leaving his mother in a constant state of exasperation. Life seemed like an unending circus, with Aaliyan playing the role of the unruly, circus clown.

The whole family became weary of Aaliyan's wandering ways. The once peaceful atmosphere of the household was now filled with the constant sound of loud footsteps and door slams. The family began to feel like prisoners in their own home, always on guard, always ready to clean up a mess or prevent a disaster.

However, it wasn't just the restless nature of Aaliyan's roaming that was causing turmoil within the household. He had also developed a knack for mischief, finding endless ways to create chaos. Whether it was drawing on the walls with crayons or tipping over plant pots, Aaliyan had a talent for getting into trouble.

His mother, in particular, found herself doling out regular scoldings and occasionally even a well-deserved smack on the backside. It wasn't out of anger, but rather out of sheer frustration and concern for her son's safety. She feared that his constant

naughtiness would result in accidents or harm, and thus resorted to disciplinary action as a way to teach him boundaries.

The beating from his mother, though well-intentioned, only seemed to fuel Aaliyan's mischievous behaviour further. He saw it as a challenge, a game to push the limits and see how far he could take things. The cycle of mischief, scolding, and occasional punishment seemed endless.

Despite the frustration and occasional tears shed by his family members, it was evident that Aaliyan's relentless roaming and naughtiness were simply manifestations of his insatiable curiosity and thirst for adventure. He saw the world around him as a playground, ready to be explored and experimented with. It was clear that he possessed a spirit full of life, yearning to discover the wonders that lay beyond the comfort of the family home.

As the years passed and Aaliyan grew older, his thirst for adventure became more pronounced. No longer content with simply walking along paths, he found himself drawn to the exhilarating heights of the boundary walls surrounding his home. Striding confidently from one end to the other, he experienced the thrill of balancing on the edge and defying gravity.

However, Aaliyan's adventurous spirit often collided with the harsh reality of luck. One ill-fated day, as he stood in his bedroom with his mother tidying up, the desire to explore got the best of him. Ignoring the warning voice inside his head, he climbed onto the bed and attempted to open the adjacent window. Tragically, misfortune struck in the form of a treacherous fall from the first floor, his body crashing onto the unforgiving cemented ground below.

In the blink of an eye, Aaliyan lost consciousness and was rushed to the hospital. Panic and worry plagued his family, who anxiously gathered around his bedside, hoping and praying for his speedy recovery. For two seemingly endless days, Aaliyan battled

the thin line between life and death, his loved ones awaiting a miracle.

Finally, against all odds, Aaliyan's eyes fluttered open, a faint glimmer of consciousness returning to him. The collective sigh of relief from his family echoed throughout the hospital walls, as they embraced this small victory. Slowly but surely, Aaliyan's strength returned, and after a period of careful recovery, he was deemed fit for discharge.

Grateful for his miraculous recovery, Aaliyan's family decided to express their gratitude through the time-honoured tradition of sacrifice. Two sheep were offered to symbolize their thankfulness for his regained health and the restoration of peace within their household. The sound of the sacrificial ritual, tinged with both solemnity and jubilation, resonated through the air, as the family marked this significant moment in their lives.

Yet, the calmness that settled upon Aaliyan was short-lived. Restlessness began to creep into his bones, fuelling an insatiable curiosity that could not be suppressed. Against the disapproving whispers and worried looks from his family, Aaliyan secretly hatched plans for his next misadventure.

One such misadventure unfolded in the garden, where he dashed from end to end with unbridled enthusiasm. However, the carefree sprint took an unexpected turn when he collided with a pomegranate tree, dislodging a yellow bottle containing a poisonous white substance meant for treating trees. Oblivious to the potential danger, Aaliyan mistook it for milk and began to drink. Fortunately, his grandfather intervened just in time, rushing to the scene and snatching the bottle from his grasp.

Realizing the perilous mistake, Aaliyan found himself once again in the throes of a life-threatening situation. Urgently transported to the hospital, he underwent stomach pumping – a crucial procedure aimed at extracting toxins before they could be absorbed. Amidst the medical intervention, his tearful declarations

echoed through the hospital room, a remorseful pledge that this reckless act would not be repeated.

For a while, Aaliyan managed to suppress his mischievous side, determined to behave. However, it was only a matter of time before his natural curiosity and mischievous nature got the better of him. On another fateful day, unable to resist the urge, he picked up a stick and ventured outside his door.

As he strolled along the street, a mischievous gleam in his eyes, Aaliyan noticed a stray dog peacefully sleeping by the sidewalk. A wave of excitement washed over him, and without thinking twice, he approached the dozing canine. Holding the stick in his hand, he couldn't resist the temptation to poke the dog's nose playfully.

However, in a flash, Aaliyan's playful act took an unexpected turn. The startled dog, reacting to the sudden surge of pain, snapped at his leg, sinking its sharp teeth into his flesh. A sharp cry escaped Aaliyan's lips as the pain shot through his body, his misadventure quickly turning into a painful reality.

Witnessing the horrifying incident, nearby bystanders rushed to Aaliyan's aid. They immediately called for an ambulance, and he was swiftly transported to the nearest hospital. Aaliyan's leg was bleeding profusely, staining his clothes and leaving a trail on the hospital floor.

Upon their arrival, the doctor quickly assessed his condition. Working swiftly and efficiently, he provided Aaliyan with immediate first aid. The bleeding was staunched, the wound was carefully cleaned, and a sterile bandage was applied to prevent any further contamination.

While attending to his injuries, the doctor grew concerned about the severity of the dog bite. Realizing the potential risk of rabies, they suggested a series of seven rabies vaccine doses to ensure Aaliyan's safety and well-being. This precautionary

measure aimed to protect him from the potentially fatal disease that can be transmitted through an infected animal's bite.

Despite the pain and discomfort, Aaliyan was taken to undergo a series of injections. Each shot was administered at specific intervals, following a carefully crafted schedule to ensure the vaccine's effectiveness and protect him from the potential threat of rabies.

As he received the vaccinations, Aaliyan reflected on his misadventure and the consequences of his actions. He realized the importance of resisting temptation, thinking before acting, and always prioritizing the safety and well-being of himself.

As the days went by and Aaliyan's physical wounds healed, he reflected on his past mistakes and the pain he had endured. He realized that he had been fortunate to recover from his misadventure without any long-lasting effects. This realization made him all the more determined to prioritize his safety.

However, as time passed, Aaliyan's memories of the pain he had suffered began to fade away. The allure of adventure and excitement once again started to tempt him. Thoughts of embarking on another adventure started to creep into his mind, urging him to quench his thirst for thrills once more. Like a dog's tail, which can never be straight even if it is put into a pipe for years together, Aaliyan's spirit persisted in its quest for the unknown.



A Tale of a Tailor



Once upon a time, in a small town, there lived a tailor by the name of Imtiyaz. Renowned for his expertise in crafting exquisite dresses, he earned the affectionate moniker "Imtiyaz Tailor" among locals, particularly the ladies for whom he meticulously tailored garments.

Imtiyaz's journey was not one of ease but marked by adversity from an early age. Orphaned tragically at the tender age of 19 due to a fatal road accident that claimed the lives of his parents, he found himself the sole caretaker of his younger brother, Samir. Left to navigate the harsh realities of life without parental guidance, Imtiyaz faced the daunting challenge of financial instability, with no kin extending a helping hand.

Despite the daunting circumstances, Imtiyaz's determination remained unshaken. Refusing to let adversity dictate his fate, he made a pivotal decision to forgo his own educational pursuits, ensuring that his brother, Samir, could continue his studies uninterrupted, thus safeguarding his future.

Determined to carve his path to success, Imtiyaz found solace in the art of tailoring. He joined a local tailor shop and wholeheartedly committed himself to learning the craft of tailoring. With unwavering dedication and an insatiable hunger for knowledge, he honed his skills under the tutelage of seasoned craftsmen, gradually becoming a proficient dressmaker.

Armed with his newfound expertise, Imtiyaz seized the opportunity to establish his own tailoring venture, setting up a

modest shop in his neighbourhood. Despite the lingering spectre of financial hardship, he remained steadfast in his commitment to his brother's education, ensuring that Samir's scholarly pursuits were never compromised. Imtiyaz understood the power of knowledge and the opportunities it could unlock, and he wanted his brother to have the best chance at success.

As time went on, Imtiyaz's hard work and dedication began to bear fruit, and his tailoring business flourished. He became known not only for his exceptional craftsmanship but also for his kindness and willingness to help those in need. Imtiyaz's compassionate nature endeared him to the community, turning his shop into a hub where people gathered not just for his tailoring skills but also to discuss politics and social issues. His shop became a well-known and respected landmark in the area.

In a twist of fate, Imtiyaz found love in the most unexpected place – in his cousin, Asiya. Their shared experiences and deep understanding of each other's struggles brought them closer, and they soon realized they were meant to be together. Imtiyaz's marriage to Asiya brought immeasurable joy and happiness to his life, further strengthening his resolve to create a better future for himself and his loved ones.

In spite of facing financial difficulties, Imtiyaz had always prioritized his younger brother's education. He made sure that his brother's studies continued unhindered, going above and beyond to provide him with the necessary resources and support.

After some time, Samir pursued engineering and secured a seat in civil engineering. Upon completing his degree, he faced challenges in finding employment. However, fortune smiled upon him when Imtiyaz, through a client with significant influence in the secretariat, managed to secure a government job for his brother, Samir. With determination and hard work, Samir swiftly climbed the ranks, attaining a prestigious position.

Samir's successful career paved the way for a promising marriage proposal, leading him to tie the knot with Humaira, hailing from a wealthy family. As a wedding gift, Humaira's father generously gifted them a lavish house in an affluent neighbourhood, prompting the couple to relocate and embrace a life of luxury.

As Samir embraced his new lifestyle, Imtiyaz found himself grappling with mixed emotions.

Despite his initial joy for his brother's prosperity, Imtiyaz soon began to feel the heavy weight of comparison and the stark contrast between their lives. The luxurious lifestyle that Samir now enjoyed with his wife Humaira seemed like a constant reminder of Imtiyaz's own financial struggles. While Samir's life flourished, Imtiyaz started to feel left behind and burdened by a growing sense of inadequacy.

Imtiyaz lived a modest existence in a small house, stitching dreams into cloth with his nimble fingers. On the other hand, Samir had risen through the ranks of society, his success fuelled by sheer determination and untiring ambition.

The gap between the two brothers began to widen, an almost imperceptible crack at first, growing into a vast chasm that neither could bridge. Initially, Samir would visit his brother Imtiyaz frequently, cherishing the simple moments they shared. Their bond, forged in the fires of childhood and tempered by shared struggles, seemed unbreakable. Yet, as Samir became increasingly entangled in the clutches of his newfound life, a different force began to pull him away.

Humaira, his wife, ever mindful of societal expectations, played a subtle yet potent role in this shift. She delicately orchestrated a dance of manipulation, weaving a web of gentle persuasion around her husband's heart. She insisted, with a tone laced with concern and propriety, that their social status did not align with that of Imtiyaz. She painted their association as a stain

on their newly elevated position, gently nudging Samir to reconsider his ties with his brother.

At first, Samir resisted, clinging to the memories of shared childhood dreams and the bond they had cultivated over the years. But the weight of societal expectations, coupled with Humaira's incessant whispers, began to erode his resolve. Slowly, reluctantly, he started to distance himself from Imtiyaz. The visits became less frequent, the conversations shorter, and the excuses more plentiful.

Imtiyaz, ever observant, felt the cold winds of change long before Samir acknowledged them. His heart ached as he watched his brother, his confidant, and friend, slip away. The warmth that once filled their interactions was replaced by an unsettling chill, a silence that spoke of unspoken truths and unshed tears.

Time continued to pass, and as it did, the once inseparable bond between the brothers dissolved into the ether of distant memories. Imtiyaz, now weathered by age, found solace in the familiarity of his humble tailor shop, its interior still echoing the stitching melodies of his trade. Despite the passage of years, his financial circumstances remained stagnant, mirroring the unchanged façade of his establishment.

One day, destiny intervened, while going about his usual routine, Imtiyaz heard a desperate plea for O Positive blood donation at the SMHS hospital. The patient in need was critically injured, and without a moment's hesitation, Imtiyaz decided to offer his blood to save a life. With determination lighting the path before him, he shuttered his shop and he boarded a bus bound for the hospital.

Arriving at the hospital after a brief half-hour journey, Imtiyaz was greeted by a chaotic scene teeming with life's raw tapestry; a symphony of urgency and perseverance painted against the backdrop of gleaming glass. The edifice of SMHS stood as a sentinel of hope amidst the chaos, its corridors bustling with the ebb and flow of humanity's struggle against affliction.

Crossing the threshold into the hospital's Imtiyaz was enveloped by a palpable ambiance of resolve, where the scent of antiseptic mingled harmoniously with the fragrance of blossoms, serving as a reminder of life's delicate balance. With each step, he bore witness to the ceaseless motion of healing hands and vigilant minds, a testament to the resilience of the human spirit.

Navigating through the labyrinthine corridors, Imtiyaz found himself drawn inexorably towards his purpose, guided by the silent symphony of shared determination. At last, he stood before the reception desk, inquiring about the specific location where his blood was required. Guided to a room on the second floor, Imtiyaz made his way there to make his donation.

As Imtiyaz entered the room, he was greeted by the sight of medical professionals bustling around, attending to patients with utmost care and precision. The atmosphere was filled with a mix of tension and determination, as doctors and nurses worked tirelessly to save lives. Imtiyaz felt a sense of reverence for the dedicated individuals who devoted their lives to the service of others.

Taking a seat on one of the chairs in the donation area, Imtiyaz watched as the medical staff prepared the necessary equipment. A nurse approached him with a warm smile, thanking him for his willingness to donate blood. She explained the process to him, assuring him that it would be quick and painless. Imtiyaz nodded, ready to do his part in this life-saving act. During the donation, Imtiyaz engaged in conversation with the nurse, learning about the hospital's ongoing efforts to facilitate blood donations and raise awareness about the importance of donating regularly. He felt a deep sense of pride knowing that he was part of a larger community of caring individuals who were committed to saving lives.

Upon leaving the blood centre, an unexpected question was posed to Imtiyaz: did he wish to meet the recipient of his blood donation? Intrigued yet uncertain, he decided to proceed and was directed to room number 17 on the second floor.

Approaching the designated room, Imtiyaz was abruptly seized by astonishment, his senses ensnared by a tableau that seized his breath: sprawled upon the bed lay none other than his estranged brother, Samir. A flood of memories and emotions cascaded through Imtiyaz's consciousness, mingling with disbelief as he grappled with the realization that the blood coursing through Samir's veins now bore an intimate connection to his own.

Slowly, tentatively, Imtiyaz inched closer to the threshold of the room, his heart drumming a frenetic rhythm within his chest. Yet, as his gaze fell upon the figure beside Samir's bedside, another jolt of astonishment coursed through his veins. There, amidst the silent tableau, stood Humaira – a woman whose presence bore an uncanny resonance, stirring dormant echoes within the recesses of Imtiyaz's consciousness.

Her presence evoked a labyrinth of memories, each thread weaving a tapestry of unresolved emotions and unanswered questions. Imtiyaz found himself ensnared within the enigma of her gaze, grappling with the enigmatic tendrils of fate that bound their lives together inextricably.

Feeling a mix of confusion and a sense of betrayal, Imtiyaz slowly retreated from the room. The weight of their estrangement, the years of separation, and the pain he had suffered resurfaced in his mind. It was as if the universe had conspired to separate them, only to reveal the magnitude of their broken relationship.

Silently, Imtiyaz returned to his home, consumed by conflicting emotions. The encounter at the hospital had stirred up a storm within him, reawakening buried memories and forcing him to confront the choices he had made. He knew deep within that there was much healing to be done, but he also understood that it would require immense courage and effort to bridge the chasm that had grown between him and his brother.



Electricity Bill



Ali Mohammad was a hardworking daily wage labourer, eking out a living under the relentless sun and shadow of uncertainty. Every day, he rose before dawn, his hands calloused and worn from years of hard labour. Earning a modest Rs 700 a day, he sought work in the bustling market square, where labourers like him awaited the call for temporary jobs. He was relentless in his pursuit of stability for his loved ones, driven by the responsibility of providing for them despite the challenges life threw his way.

At home, Ali's heart was anchored by the love of his three daughters: Yasmeen, Waheeda, and Afroza—who were the light of his life. Despite his limited means, he instilled in them the values of hard work, resilience, and respect. Each girl possessed her own unique spirit, yet they all shared a deep admiration for their father, revering the tireless sacrifices he made for their well-being.

Amidst the bustle of daily life, Ali faced another formidable challenge—his ailing wife, who suffered from chronic chest diseases, which left her confined to their modest home most of the time. Her persistent illness cast a shadow over their household, demanding not only physical care but also emotional resilience from the entire family. Ali balanced his job and responsibilities at home, often stepping into the role of caretaker, ensuring that his wife received the medicines she needed while remaining attentive to his daughters' schooling and aspirations.

For Yasmeen, Waheeda, and Afroza, their father was more than just a provider. He was their hero, a symbol of unyielding strength and perseverance. Watching him labour in the scorching sun or the biting cold, they understood the depth of his sacrifices. The struggle to make ends meet was a constant presence in their lives, but so too was the love that bound their small family together, a love that turned their hardships into shared resolve.

Every evening, as the day's labour gave way to twilight, the family would gather around the dastarkhwan for their one true moment of solace. Over simple meals, they would recount the events of the day, laughter mingling with dreams spoken aloud, each story a thread in the fabric of their togetherness. These moments reminded Ali of why he endured so much—the hope in his daughters' eyes, the laughter that warmed their home, the joy that somehow persisted even in the face of struggle. They were his reason, his driving force.

One cold, misty morning, Ali set off for work, bracing himself against the biting wind that swept through the streets. As he turned onto the main road, an unusual commotion caught his attention. A massive crowd had gathered, spilling onto the street and bringing traffic to a standstill. The protesters were chanting slogans, their voices echoing with a mix of anger and despair. Ali slowed his steps, curiosity drawing him closer to the scene.

The demonstration was against the recent installation of smart electric meters—a move that had sparked outrage among the residents. The new meters, they feared, would drive electricity tariffs sky-high, an unbearable blow for families already struggling to survive. A middle-aged woman, her face etched with exhaustion, raised her voice above the din. "This power is generated from our rivers, yet they sell it to other states and make us pay the price!" she cried, her tone a blend of bitterness and defiance.

Ali's heart sank momentarily, but he steeled himself. The man's tone was brusque, but not dismissive. "Alright," Ali replied firmly, his voice steady despite the frustration bubbling underneath. He knew the road ahead wouldn't be easy, but he was determined to see it through.

Determined to fix this, Ali took leave from work the next day and visited the Power Development Department (PDD) office. At the office, he was directed to meet the Assistant Executive Engineer (AEE). However, before he could enter the office, a peon stopped him. "Write a formal application," the peon instructed. "Only then can the AEE review your case."

Ali sighed deeply, frustration simmering just beneath the surface. He crossed the street to a small, dimly lit photocopy shop, where he got his complaint drafted. The process felt unnecessarily tedious, but Ali complied, determined to see this through. With his application in hand, he returned to the AEE's office and handed it to the peon, who disappeared inside, leaving Ali waiting in the cramped corridor.

Minutes turned into what felt like an eternity as Ali sat on a creaky wooden bench, watching others come and go. The corridor was dimly lit, the air heavy with a mix of impatience and resignation from other visitors. Finally, the bell rang, signalling his turn. Taking a deep breath, Ali stepped into the office, his heart pounding as he prepared to explain his plight.

The AEE sat behind a large desk cluttered with files, barely glancing up as Ali began to explain his predicament. Ali spoke earnestly, detailing his family's modest lifestyle and lack of high-energy-consuming appliances. "Sir, I beg you to resolve this quickly. I simply cannot afford this bill," he implored, his voice raw with emotion.

The Assistant Executive Engineer (AEE) glanced at Ali's application with an air of disinterest, barely looking up as he handed it back. "Take this to the field engineer. He's the one who

can verify your claims," the AEE said, his tone dismissive and curt. The indifference in his words stung, but Ali swallowed his frustration and set out to find the field engineer.

Ali's heart sank further. His plea for urgency fell on deaf ears. Disheartened, he left the office and began his search for the field engineer, unsure of where to go next. Each step felt heavier than the last, yet he trudged on, determined to fight this injustice no matter how many obstacles stood in his way.

His search led to further disappointment. The field engineer, he was informed, was out on a site visit. Left with no choice, Ali returned home, vowing to try again. The next day, he arrived early, determined to make progress. Hours of waiting finally brought him face-to-face with the field engineer, who skimmed through the application and offered a vague reassurance. "Don't worry. I'll handle this," the engineer said casually.

Ali felt a small flicker of hope. At least someone had finally acknowledged his problem. He returned to his daily routine, trusting that the matter was now in capable hands. But when the next utility bill arrived, Ali's fragile optimism crumbled. The amount had skyrocketed to an unimaginable Rs. 98,000. The sheer absurdity of the figure left him paralyzed with shock. His worst fears had materialized—things had gone from bad to worse.

Desperation propelled Ali back to the Power Development Department (PDD) office. The field engineer, when confronted, initially struggled to recognize him or recall the application. After an agonizing search through disorganized piles of paperwork, the engineer finally retrieved it. "I'll sort it out this time," he said, the same empty assurance as before. But Ali's faith was waning. Each interaction chipped away at his resolve, the system's inefficiency and apathy pulling him deeper into despair.

Days turned into weeks, and yet there was no resolution. When the following month's bill arrived, Ali's worst nightmare repeated itself—the amount had inflated even further. He could

barely comprehend the numbers staring back at him. Disheartened and nearly broken, he decided to visit the PDD office once more, clinging to the faint hope that persistence might yield results.

This time, a new hurdle awaited him. The field engineer he had been dealing with had been transferred, replaced by someone unfamiliar with Ali's case. Frustrated but still determined, Ali met with the new engineer, only to be dismissed yet again. "I can't help you with this," the engineer said bluntly. "You'll have to take it up with the chief engineer."

Dejected, Ali left the office, his steps heavy and his spirit crushed. The endless cycle of bureaucracy had drained him of energy, resources, and hope. Each new obstacle felt like a deliberate attempt by the system to wear him down, leaving him stranded in a labyrinth of indifference with no clear way out.

A few days later, in a desperate attempt for resolution, Ali visited the Chief Engineer's office, only to face the same rigmarole: endless forms, mind-numbing bureaucratic jargon, and the same unhelpful, vague reassurances. His problem persisted, and after innumerable visits—each more demoralizing than the last—he left, feeling as though he were battling against a tidal wave of apathy that threatened to swallow him whole.

Then came the moment that sent him crashing under the weight of despair: one evening, as he returned home, his family broke the devastating news. Their electricity had been disconnected due to non-payment of the bill. This was another unbearable burden added to his already hefty shoulders.

The following morning, when he met the lineman, he was met with an icy stare and a curt ultimatum. "You have to pay the bill," the lineman said, without an ounce of empathy. "I've got orders from the higher-ups." Ali felt a hot rush of emotion—anger, helplessness, and despair swirled within him, leaving him reeling. He left the conversation feeling hollow, the walls of frustration closing in around him.

Overwhelmed, he found it impossible to think clearly. He didn't attend work that day; the weight of his troubles kept him locked away in his room, pacing aimlessly, lost in a maze of emotions. The sun rose and set without him feeling its warmth, the shadows growing longer and darker as evening approached.

As night draped its heavy cloak over the world outside, Ali returned home after a futile day—a day spent wrestling with his own desolation. Their home, now devoid of electricity, felt like an echo of the despair that inhabited him. He found his family gathered around a flickering candle, the dim light casting shadows on faces that bore the weight of their collective struggles. He ate a small dinner, barely tasting the food that had always brought him comfort. The day had drained him; weary and despondent, he entered his room, the familiar cocoon of his sanctuary becoming a prison.

As the morning light illuminated the room, and when his wife awoke to find Ali missing from their shared bed, a flicker of concern ignited in her heart. She assumed he had gone to the washroom and stretched out in the warmth of the comforter. But when she stepped outside into the courtyard, her heart sank into the abyss of horror. There, dangling from the gnarled branches of the willow tree, was Ali.

In an instant, the life was extinguished from her husband's body, leaving nothing but a haunting reminder of a battle lost against a system that had shown him no mercy. Ali had become a tragic victim of despair, a life extinguished amidst the indifference of bureaucracy, leaving behind echoes of his struggles in the silent recesses of their home. A single beautiful soul lost to the overwhelming weight of hopelessness, leaving a family shattered and a community grappling with the question: How many more must suffer before the system is forced to serve those it is meant to protect?



Fruit Vendor



Irfan was a humble fruit vendor who spent his days selling an array of fresh, seasonal fruits from his weathered wooden cart at Batamaloo bus-stand, a bustling marketplace filled with life and energy. His cart was a vibrant display, always stocked with a variety of seasonal fruits that not only reflected the lush bounty of nature but also showcased his keen understanding of what each time of year had to offer.

Irfan's day began before the sun had fully risen. At 5:00 a.m., he would wheel his wooden cart into position, ready to serve the early morning shoppers. His workday was long, often stretching late into the night, but he never complained. Despite the demanding hours, he approached each day with gratitude, knowing that his hard work was for a greater purpose—his family.

At the close of each day, he dismantled his setup with practiced efficiency, stacking the fruit crates neatly and draping a sturdy blue plastic sheet over them before fastening it securely with ropes, safeguarding his goods from the night's elements. Each morning, he would reverse the process, preparing his cart for another day with the same dedication. This steadfast routine persisted throughout the year, enduring the biting cold of January and the blistering heat of July and August alike. To an outsider, this routine may have seemed monotonous, but for Irfan, it was a labour of love, a testament to his resilience and steadfastness.

At the heart of Irfan's life was his small but precious family. His wife, Uzma, was his partner in every sense of the

word. She was not only beautiful but also wise and supportive, helping him navigate the challenges of life. Their two children, Noor and Imran, were the light of their lives. Noor, their eldest, was a bright and curious girl with an insatiable love for reading, while Imran, the younger of the two, was playful and full of boundless energy, his days largely filled with the thrill of cricket, where his laughter and enthusiasm echoed in every game he played.

Irfan's dream was simple yet profound: he aspired to provide his family with a happy and secure life. A firm believer in the power of education, Irfan was determined to provide his children with the best schooling he could afford. He was resolute that Noor and Imran would not suffer from the lack of education that had limited his own opportunities. He envisioned a future where his children could pursue their dreams, free from the financial struggles he had faced.

Though his dreams were modest, they were deeply meaningful. Irfan didn't aspire to wealth or luxury; he found joy in small things—a hearty meal shared with his family, the laughter of his children, or a satisfied customer returning to his cart. His life was a testament to the beauty of perseverance, love, and the quiet strength of a man who worked tirelessly for the happiness of those he held dear.

But life, as unpredictable as it is, took a turn that Irfan could never have foreseen. One evening, after a long and exhausting day, Irfan settled down for dinner with his family. As they shared a simple meal, the television aired a special address by the Prime Minister. In a sombre tone, the Prime Minister announced an unprecedented nationwide lockdown aimed at curbing the relentless spread of the COVID-19 pandemic. Effective from midnight, the lockdown would halt all movement and confine people to their homes for 21 days.

Irfan, unfamiliar with the concept of a lockdown, didn't grasp its full implications that night. But the stark reality hit him the next morning when he stepped outside to find his neighbourhood sealed off by barricades and police enforcing strict restrictions. His daily routine came to an abrupt halt, confining him to his modest home. The once-lively streets were now eerily silent, and his cart, his livelihood, was left abandoned at the Batamaloo bus-stand, filled with fruits. Anxiety gripped him as he worried about the fate of his cart and the perishable goods it held.

For 21 days, Irfan stayed confined within the walls of his modest home, venturing out only to purchase essentials. The lockdown stretched on, turning his small world even smaller. Each passing day added to his anxiety. He worried incessantly about his fruit cart and the stock he had left behind. The thought gnawed at him, keeping him awake at night, his mind clouded with uncertainty. As the lockdown stretched into its third week, Irfan felt the pangs of despair deepen.

When the lockdown was partially lifted, Irfan rushed to Batamaloo, his heart heavy with dread. The streets, though still quieter than before, were slowly coming back to life. As he approached his cart, the sight before him confirmed his worst fears. The fruits were now a rotting heap. The stench was overwhelming, and so was his heartbreak.

Irfan stood amidst the scattered remnants of rotten fruit crates, the acrid smell of decay mingling with the dust in the air. His dreams now seemed as lifeless as the spoiled fruit before him. His hands trembled as he reached out, the heartbreak evident in his eyes. Tears welled up in his eyes, spilling down his cheeks as he wept bitterly, the weight of his loss pressing down on him like a mountain. Each tear carried with it the despair of a man who had worked tirelessly, only to see his efforts reduced to nothing by the cruel hand of misfortune.

Determined to reclaim some semblance of order, Irfan began the arduous task of cleaning up. One by one, he hurled the rotten fruits into the open wasteland nearby, their sickly sweet stench clinging stubbornly to the air. He scrubbed the dirt from his wooden cart, his hands raw and trembling from exertion. Finally, he draped the familiar blue plastic sheet over the cart. As he stepped back, gazing at his cart, now clean but painfully empty, his mind swirled with anxious thoughts. How would he restart his business? Where would he find the money to purchase fresh fruits?

Disheartened and exhausted, Irfan trudged back home, his shoulders slumped under the weight of his burden. The pandemic had not only ravaged the world but had also torn apart his modest livelihood, leaving him grappling with the uncertainties of tomorrow. As he stepped into his small, dimly lit home, his wife, Uzma, noticed his early return and the sombre expression etched on his face.

"Why are you back so soon?" Uzma asked, her voice tinged with concern.

But Irfan said nothing. Slowly, he lowered himself onto the kitchen floor, the silence between them thick and heavy. Uzma watched him, her own heart aching at the sight of her husband, a man who had always been a pillar of strength, now looking so utterly defeated. She hesitated for a moment before quietly sitting down beside him, her presence a silent offer of comfort.

The house was still, save for the faint hum of a ceiling fan and the distant sounds of the bustling street outside. Irfan's gaze remained fixed on the floor, his thoughts a tangled mess of fear and frustration. How would he rebuild his shattered livelihood? How could he face the world again? And yet, somewhere in the depths of his despair, a tiny spark of determination flickered. He had faced hardships before, but this felt insurmountable.

At the break of dawn, Irfan headed to the bustling wholesale fruit market. The air was thick with the scent of ripened fruits, and the muffled calls of hawkers. He approached the fruit dealer from whom he had regularly bought produce for his small cart. The dealer, however, tactfully avoided his plea for fruits on credit. Undeterred, Irfan moved to another vendor, but his request was met with a curt refusal. One by one, he approached various other dealers, each time encountering the same disheartening rejection. By the time he left the market, his shoulders were slumped, and his face bore the unmistakable mask of dejection.

The walk home felt endless. The sun bore down mercilessly, its heat only amplifying the heaviness in his chest. By the time Irfan arrived, his steps were slow, his head bowed low, and his thoughts a tangled mess of hopelessness. Uzma, his wife, noticed immediately. She had always been attuned to his emotions, able to read his silence like an open book. Without a word, she placed a steaming cup of tea in his hands, her eyes scanning his face for answers. Irfan took the tea but remained quiet, his gaze distant, lost in thought.

As the hours passed, the silence between them became unbearable. Uzma finally broke it with a gentle, probing question, urging him to share what had happened. Irfan hesitated but eventually relented, his voice heavy with sorrow as he recounted the fruitless journey to the mandi. His words were tinged with frustration and defeat, and when he finished, he sank back into silence, his head in his hands.

Uzma listened carefully, her mind working swiftly. A faint smile played on her lips as an idea took shape. "Is this why you're so worried?" she asked, her tone calm and reassuring. Irfan looked up at her, puzzled by her unexpected reaction.

"What do you mean?" he asked, a hint of irritation creeping into his voice.

Uzma stood and disappeared into the adjoining room. Moments later, she returned, holding a small box. She placed it on the floor, opened it carefully, and revealed a simple yet elegant gold ring. Irfan's eyes widened in surprise.

"Where did this come from?" he asked, his voice barely above a whisper.

Uzma smiled, her eyes glistening with emotion. "I've been saving a little from my monthly expenditure," she admitted. "I had this ring made without telling you. I thought it might come in handy one day, and today is that day."

Irfan was stunned. His gaze shifted between the ring and Uzma's face, struggling to find the words to express what he felt. She took his hand and pressed the ring into his palm. "Sell this," she said softly. "Use the money to buy the fruits you need and restart your business. We'll rebuild together."

At that moment, Irfan's despair gave way to a profound sense of gratitude. The tiny spark of determination within him roared into a steady flame. He realized that with Uzma by his side, no challenge was truly insurmountable. Holding the ring tightly, he silently vowed to rise again, not just for himself but for the woman who believed in him when he struggled to believe in himself.



About the Book

Whispers Beneath the Peaks is an evocative and mesmerizing collection of 24 short stories that beckon readers into the soul of the Kashmir Valley. Each tale unravels the vibrant cultural heritage, intricate social fabric, and enduring complexities that define the lives of its people. With a masterful blend of fiction and lived experience, these stories immerse readers in a world where the personal and the political, the timeless and the fleeting, all converge.

Through his eloquent prose, Tarif Naaz captures the heartbeat of Kashmir, weaving a tapestry of emotions, struggles, and moments of transcendence that resonate universally. The collection pulses with the delicate rhythms of everyday life, offering windows into the myriad layers of personal and societal conflict that have shaped the region.

Naaz's storytelling is a testament to his unparalleled ability to navigate the emotional landscapes of his characters. With rare sensitivity, he illuminates the deep sense of belonging, loss, and resilience that pervades the valley. Through every word, he paints not just a portrait of a place, but of the human experience in all its contradictions and complexities.

In *Whispers Beneath the Peaks*, the Kashmir Valley itself becomes a character—a land both serene and scarred, where snow-dusted mountains watch over the enduring struggles of those who call it home. Here, love, loss, and hope rise like the mist over the hills, transcending the boundaries of time and place.

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Tarif Naaz, a native of Kashmir, is a celebrated author and storyteller whose works are deeply rooted in the cultural and social fabric of his homeland. Born and raised in the picturesque yet turbulent valley, he completed his post-graduate studies at the University of Kashmir in 1998.

Drawing inspiration from his surroundings, Naaz has emerged as a leading voice in contemporary English literature from Kashmir, offering narratives that are both powerful and profoundly authentic. He is the author of two acclaimed books— *Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah: A Victim of Betrayal*, and *Mayhem in Paradise*—which explore the historical and political intricacies of

Kashmir. His latest work, "Whispers Beneath the Peaks", is a masterfully crafted collection of short stories that intricately explores the depths of human behavior. Through vivid storytelling and richly drawn characters, the book confronts a diverse array of themes—from love and loss to resilience and redemption—while shedding light on pressing social issues and the urgent call for reform. Each tale resonates with emotional depth and thought-provoking insight, making it not only a compelling read but also a powerful reflection on the human condition. Beyond his historical and political writings, Tarif Naaz is widely recognized for his

Kashmiri life. His novels and short stories paint a vivid tapestry of the region's rich traditions, cultural nuances, and the resilience of its people through decades of unrest. Naaz has witnessed firsthand the impact of conflict on communities. This personal experience lends a raw, heartfelt depth to his work, capturing the pain, endurance, and hope of Kashmir's people.

Through his literary contributions, Tarif Naaz not only chronicles the realities of life in the valley but also serves as a passionate advocate for peace, unity, and understanding. His work transcends borders, offering readers a deeply moving and insightful glimpse into a land long misunderstood.

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